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The Creativity Loophole:  
Needlework, Social Conventions, and the Permissibility of Creative Expression  
for Early American Women

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at  
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Richmond, Virginia  
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### Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my family for expecting great things from me, believing I will accomplish them, and supporting me so I can achieve them.

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## Abstract

### THE CREATIVITY LOOPHOLE: NEEDLEWORK, SOCIAL CONVENTIONS, AND THE PERMISSIBILITY OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION FOR EARLY AMERICAN WOMEN

By Alyce Graham, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Director: Dr. Sarah Meacham, Assistant Professor of History

This thesis investigates creative expression through needlework by wealthy or elite women in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, focusing on women in the United States South. This inquiry begins in broad terms and proceeds to the close examination of one particular needlework sampler held in the collection of the Valentine Richmond History Center. The first chapter uses prescriptive literature popular in the eighteenth century to establish the restrictive, obedient, and subservient expectations for women's behavior. The second chapter explores the reasons that the same books that prohibited many forms of pleasure promoted needlework as an acceptable activity for women. This chapter addresses the practical aspect of needlework, the presence and significance of textiles in the home, and the ways needlework expressed creativity. The final chapter analyzes a needlework sampler stitched in 1812, connecting it both with the themes introduced in the first two chapters and a wider range of issues.

## Introduction

This thesis investigates the creative expression through needlework by wealthy or elite women in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, focusing on women in the United States South. This inquiry begins in broad terms, looking first at social conventions and then at the practicality of sewing before proceeding to the close examination of one particular needlework sampler. The first chapter uses prescriptive literature popular in the eighteenth century to establish the restrictive, obedient, and subservient expectations for women's behavior that limited creative expression. The second chapter explores the reasons that the same books that prohibited many forms of pleasure promoted needlework as an acceptable activity for women. This chapter addresses the practical aspect of needlework, the presence and significance of textiles in the home, and the ways needlework expressed creativity. The final chapter analyzes a needlework sampler stitched in Washington, D.C. in 1812, commemorating a tragic fire at a theater in Richmond, Virginia in 1811. The sampler connects both with the themes introduced in the first two chapters and a wider range of issues, such as the function of mourning and commemorative arts in the traditional generational teaching and learning patterns of female knowledge, women's reactions to and interpretations of news stories, and their acceptance and rejection of themes in popular literature.

To stay within the scope of this project, some issues have not been addressed or addressed only briefly, including the greater commercial endeavor of dressmaking, the procurement and maintenance of clothing for men, children and slaves, and work done by women not among the gentry.

Looking at the needlework of southern women or attempting an analysis of how textiles and needlework affected their lives is no straightforward process. Little textual evidence from the

hands of eighteenth-century southern women survives. For this very reason, opening the door to wider use of extant textile pieces as resources that speak in as loud and layered a voice as written sources can add valuable source material to the study of the lives of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women. Where textile manufacture, transformation, and use in New England have been widely documented, similar work is less prevalent—though certainly not non-existent—for southern women. The third chapter, analyzing the single sampler, serves as an example of the use of a textile source to tell a story where few documents survive. The Richmond Theatre fire was covered extensively by male reporters and writers but not by women. The sampler offers a route towards understanding how one young woman processed this one event, just as women's needlework in the South offers a route towards better understanding how southern women responded to the world around them.



## Chapter One: Social Conventions

“A young Gentlewoman well accomplisht,” Hannah Woolley wrote in her 1675 advice manual, *The Gentlewoman’s Companion*, “is like a Star with five rays, Devotion, Modesty, Chastity, Discretion and Charity.”<sup>1</sup> To prove herself conversant with these virtues, a young woman in an elite eighteenth-century household followed a regimen of exacting rules and peculiarly specific regulations culled from the convoluted suggestions printed in popular advice books. Eighteenth-century conduct literature for women taught its readers the ideals of societal expectations for behavior. From these books and pamphlets, women learned how to model their speech, conversation, posture, dress, and habits according to the newest mode. Long after the books first saw print, however, they were still popular, still being read. Perhaps this was because they advised women on problems that had not become easier to approach in the intervening years. The books taught women how to be attractive to both men and women and how to protect themselves from the dangers of the world: the advances of licentious young men, the unhappiness of an ill-tempered or drunken husband, the canards of gossiping women.

Most of the advice was precautionary and prohibitive, leaving women with little flexibility concerning their behavior. Activities like reading and visiting, while acceptable, had dangerous outer limits. If abused, they might damage a woman’s spirituality, absent her too often from the home, or cultivate her vanity. One activity, however, received almost universal commendation from the literature: needlework. This skill was so roundly endorsed that John Burton, in his 1794 *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*, wrote that “knowledge of [needlework] is absolutely requisite.” Burton found the practice “attended with so many

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewoman’s Companion; or, a Guide to the Female Sex* (London, 1675. In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710, Volume 4*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 264.

advantages... that it is needless for me to enlarge upon the subject.”<sup>2</sup> He expected his readers to be familiar enough with other arguments in needlework’s favor that he needed only to refer to them, not spell them out again. While some other occupations and amusements challenged feminine virtues, needlework seemed to uphold them. Furthermore, the practicality of being skilled with a needle and knowing how to sew added a layer of protection to that already established by social convention. Women had to know how to sew to maintain clothing and household textiles, or they had to know enough about sewing to delegate the tasks properly. Under the protection of social commendation and practicality, needlework and embroidery became a wider avenue for personal expression for women than was allowed them through other outlets.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, advice manuals held meaning for women in the American South just as they did for women in England. Books meant for women were often published in the diminutive duodecimo size that had a double advantage. They were inexpensive, so a husband might be more likely to buy one for his wife, and they were portable, so women could carry them easily, looking over their pages in spare moments rather than having to designate a special time and place for reading. Because of the existing property records, linking a specific book with a specific woman or recreating one woman’s library is difficult. On a wider scale, the most popularly owned book in the South was the Christian Bible. Following that came an assortment of religious commentaries. Beyond that, the phrase “a parcel of books” repeated on probate inventories muddies the catalog.<sup>3</sup> But whether a woman had access to one particular book or another—or whether her husband did or a cousin or friend with whom she

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<sup>2</sup> John Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*, Third Edition (New York: Hugh Gaine, 1794), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 59–61, 42, 9.

corresponded did—matters less than that the ideas of behavior and attitude proposed by the books were becoming more commonly accepted by the later part of the eighteenth century. The advice books offered a window into an idealized and unattainable world, but a world that spoke to the ambitions and desires of the women who read them or heard their advice second-hand through their husbands or their female correspondents.

By describing model behaviors, prescriptive literature offered critical guidance to women searching for the actions and reactions that would display their femininity in attractive ways.<sup>4</sup> Part of this display was the tendency towards a sensory rather than rational understanding of the world. The separation from the rational came partly as an effect of the different expectations for the scope of women's knowledge compared with that of men. Girls did not attend school as regularly as boys, who were not averse with their attendance to begin with, and they were discouraged from mastering rational subjects like Latin or mathematics. Pushed from a young age towards an emotional and spiritual understanding of their world, women derived from the advice books a continuing instruction on both the outward behaviors and inward contemplation that supported such an outlook. This became truer as the gap between rational men and irrational women solidified toward the end of the eighteenth century.

Many of the books came from London printshops, connecting women with the cultivated, genteel society of England. Repudiating provinciality, elite southern women—those who had the resources and reasons to cater to their reputations—looked to England for information on the current mode in fashion and etiquette.<sup>5</sup> They took such advice to heart even though their

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<sup>4</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Analyzing the interrelationship between England and its colonies or England and the newly formed United States is another topic beyond the scope of this project. Suffice it to say that England, during both of these periods, was to varying degrees a source of knowledge about material goods and social behaviors.

circumstances differed considerably from those of London women who read the same material. Those who had access to British publications adapted what they read to their lives. In Virginia, Robert Carter's daughters read the British publication *The Spectator*, which contained recommendations for behavior and advice on genteel living.<sup>6</sup> Not all of its advice could be directly applicable to the Carter girls' lives. Prescriptive literature intimated a distant, ideal world, not a practical, realistic one. The Carter girls and others who read advice books could aspire to recreate that genteel Eden by adopting what rules and behaviors they could from those set forth in their books, but they could never hope to meet every demand.<sup>7</sup>

As part of this aspiration, women engaged in self-analysis, a new way of thinking that emerged from the religious and scientific developments of Enlightenment. Through self-analysis, people ordered and understood their world by ordering and understanding themselves.<sup>8</sup> Under its auspices, awareness of one's place in the world became preeminent by the middle of the eighteenth century. Conscious of the rituals of their lives as performance, women grew accustomed to observing and being observed. They modified their actions to suit the expectations of those who would be watching them.<sup>9</sup> Though lacking the literary salons that afforded women living in larger cities a forum for their reflective thoughts and ideas, southern women could still read and reflect on their own. And even if they were denied access to the advice books themselves—whether by illiteracy, by availability of material, or by social proscription—women would still have been aware of the trend towards carefully regulated, attentively observed genteel behavior. This behavior was not spontaneous. It was deliberate, affected, and complicated.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Bushman, *Refinement*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Saxton, *Being Good: Women's Moral Values in Early America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 19.

<sup>9</sup> Bushman, *Refinement*, xiv.

Women, considered less rational by nature than men, were believed to achieve success in this field only by relying on the guidance and instruction of men.<sup>10</sup> Accepting guidance strengthened the designation of women as irrational in that it gave them access to the rational world only by the supervision of one well versed in it. Eliza Wilkinson, in a 1782 letter from her home in Charleston, South Carolina, acknowledged the expectation for male guidance when, “determined not to make a digression or observation” in her letter, noticed that “it flies from matters of fact or plain narration, and introduces my poor opinion on the stage. What will the men say,” she wondered, “if they should see this? I am really out of *my sphere* now, and must fly to Homer for direction and instruction on household matters.”<sup>11</sup>

The male voice asserted itself in advice books, many of which were written under the guise of a male authority figure giving direction to a female in his charge. Jonas Hanway, in his 1810 book *Advice from Farmer Trueman*, doled out advice to his fictional daughter, Mary. Evan Ellis wrote to his daughter from sea, his words standing as authority while he was absent. George Savile and John Heydon also wrote to daughters, though they generalized their dedications to “a daughter,” making it clear that any directionless young female could learn from their words. These writers blended their natural authority as men with the societal authority of fathers to make their books creditable. But books written by women were considered an authority, too. Female authors did not have the instant authority of men. Instead, their sex was an obstacle to their authority. Many humbled themselves to justify the act of writing, just as Eliza Wilkinson apologized for voicing her “poor opinion” in her letter. Hannah Woolley, for example, claimed to have written *The Gentlewoman’s Companion* only by the “earnest intreaties of very many

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<sup>10</sup> Saxton, *Being Good*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Gilman, *Letters of Eliza Wilkinson* (New York: S. Colman, 1839), 66.

worthy Friends” and devoted a chapter of her work to the pedigree of the various talents that qualified her to write.<sup>12</sup>

The authority of the writers of advice books, innate for men or experiential for women, tempered the dangerous element of self-analysis. They made sure that women interpreted the world through an acceptable lens. In this way, advice manuals may have helped women bridge the gap between male authority over their interior lives, which could be frustrating and condescending, and total autonomy, which could be viewed as unfeminine. By mapping an interior world with the aid of advice manuals, women appeared on the surface to accept their irrationality and helplessness even as they took charge of their moral lives.

Advice manuals often suggested a combination of virtues and virtuous behavior that would protect women from the hazards of society. Going into the world was “a Dangerous step,” cautioned George Savile Lord Halifax in 1688 in *The Lady’s New-Year’s Gift*. “Your Vertue alone will not secure you, except it is attended with a great deal of *Prudence*. You must have *both* for your *Guard*, and not stir without them. The Enemy is abroad,” he warned his readers, “and you are sure to be taken, if you are found stragling.”<sup>13</sup> Many authors strove to define the components of virtue, that nebulous quality that could both safeguard and needed safeguarding. The virtues listed in Richard Allestree’s 1677 *The Ladies Calling* encouraged behavior that restrained women from acting on their aggression, expressing their sexuality, flaunting wealth or intellect, or assuming authority. Modesty, meekness, compassion, affability, and piety, Allestree’s equivalent of Woolley’s five-pointed star, would help women be “jealously vigilant

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<sup>12</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 167, 196–197.

<sup>13</sup> George Savile Lord Halifax, *The Lady’s New-Year’s Gift: Or, Advice to a Daughter* (London: D. Midwinter and T. Leigh, 1701 (first printed 1688). In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710, Volume 2*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 179.

against every thing, that might eclipse the radiancy or contaminate the purity of their souls.”<sup>14</sup>

Allestree dedicated a chapter to each trait, but modesty was the lynchpin of his moral system.

Modesty, he explained, “may be considered in a double notion, the one as it is opposed to Boldness and Indecency, the other to Lightness and Wantonness.”<sup>15</sup> Modesty rebuked masculine traits and enhanced feminine ones. Only through proper behavior could young women uphold their modesty, which was a coded signifier of sexual chastity. Evidence of sexual purity or corruption could be seen in a woman’s every action. Deviant women displayed a lack of proper virtue, and the horror at their misbehavior was less a reaction to the actual error—outspokenness, an incorrect hat, a clumsy dance step—than it was to the perverse sexual meaning behind their gracelessness.<sup>16</sup> Women preserved both their modesty and their good name through right behavior, which usually entailed a combination of obedience and silence.

Expected to be obedient in all manner of things, girls led circumscribed lives as they grew to be women. Allestree divided a woman’s life into three stages: virginity, marriage, and widowhood. Her relationship to men defined each step. In the first stage, young girls obeyed their parents; in the second, their husbands; the third, their grown sons or, as Allestree suggested, the memory of their husbands and their pious impulses. “The conjugal Love transplanted into the Grave,” he wrote, “improves into Piety, and laies a kind of sacred Obligation upon the Widow.”<sup>17</sup> Such obligations rendered women dependent for most of their lives. With dependency came vulnerability. “Woman has in truth no security,” Mary Astell wrote in her 1700 pamphlet,

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling in Two Parts. By the Author of the Whole Duty of Man, &c.* Fifth Impression. (Oxford, 1677. In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710, Volume 3*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 285.

*Reflections upon Marriage*, “but the Man’s Honour and Good-nature, a Security that in this present Age no wise Person would venture much upon.”<sup>18</sup> Allestree took a different stance, arguing that the obedience and submission that permeated a woman’s existence, limning the transition from one stage to the next, also led to happiness. “A Will duly submissive to lawful Superiors,” Allestree comforted his readers, “is not only an amiable thing in the eyes of others, but exceedingly happy to ones self.” Obedience brought women more contentment than it cost them, being “very cheaply bought with a little receding from ones own will or humor.”<sup>19</sup> But obedience, like other feminine virtues, was a learned skill posing as an intrinsic quality.

Many of the skills elite women possessed straddled this contradiction. Education, for girls from wealthy families, meant acquiring accomplishments like dancing, drawing, fancy needlework, or playing the piano or harp. These skills were thought to be mere emanations of their femininity, belying the practice and dedication it took to perfect them. Though women might gather dozens of polite accomplishments, they were not encouraged to expand their intellectual horizons. “But, alas!” Astell mourned, “what poor Woman is ever taught that she should have a higher Design than to get her a Husband?”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, such arts and graces were often meant for little else than to help girls win husbands, and then, if successful in that endeavor, to keep those husbands happy and devoted to their wives.<sup>21</sup> Such skills might also abet the boredom and loneliness that came with living on a plantation, distant from friends and relatives.

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage. The Third Edition. To which is Added, A Preface, in Answer to some Objections*. (London: R. Wilkin, 1706. In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710, Volume 2*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 366–367.

<sup>19</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 392.

<sup>21</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 17.



In her “Good Instructions for a young Gentlewoman, from the age of Six to Sixteen,” Woolley assumed that a girl’s “Parents have not been so remiss in their duties as not to furnish your tender age with what it is capable of understanding, and therefore do not question but that you can read well, sow and write indifferently.”<sup>22</sup> Woolley placed a higher expectation on reading than writing or sewing, but she grouped the three skills together, assuming most girls possessed them. Knowledge of sewing was widespread in the South, but reading and writing had narrower boundaries despite their value. Both reading and writing could be necessary for keeping household records or, more importantly, engaging in correspondence. Correspondence was vital to southern women living on plantations, where they may be miles from their nearest neighbors. Given their chores and children, women rarely ranged farther than five miles from their homes. Letters might sustain a fragile bond with more distant friends and relatives.<sup>23</sup> In this way, reading or writing could alleviate the tedium and solitude of plantation life. While literacy was not widespread among women in the South, neither was the boundary between literacy and illiteracy an impenetrable one. Women who could not write may have been able to read. Reading, however, was not a free and open road for women. Those who could read may have been limited in their abilities, and not all books were thought suitable for them to read.<sup>24</sup>

To acquire both basic skills and refined accomplishments, the daughters of some gentry families learned from tutors or were sent to specialized academies in northern cities. A niece of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis was to be sent from her home in Virginia to a school in Philadelphia. “She is of an affectionate disposition, very industrious and neat with her needle,” Lewis wrote on

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<sup>22</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 201.

<sup>23</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 29–30.

<sup>24</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 11.

her behalf in 1811 to a friend in Philadelphia, “and appears anxious to improve. I wish it was in my power to visit you, [and] to give my children such advantages as are to be found in Philadelphia—but I fear this must never be. Farmers are too busy to leave their homes, and I cannot part with my daughters. If I lived in Philadelphia,” Lewis concluded, “I should prefer having my daughters taught at home.”<sup>25</sup> A daughter’s education, though narrower in scope than a son’s, was still critical to establishing or affirming a family’s position. In the South, where education was accessible only to whites, access to education also served as a distinguishing mark of race.<sup>26</sup> A finishing education, weighted with signifiers of class and race, taught girls how to engage in the right sort of activities and avoid the stigma of manual labor. The result of this education was not merely for girls to have fun or become pleasant companions. The “sociability” of the elite classes set them apart from those burdened with heavy work.<sup>27</sup> More importantly in their marriage-focused society, their accomplishments might set them apart from the milieu of more dimly shining stars at events where young men and women met in mixed company.

When offers of marriage began to arrive, girls had little choice whom they came from or how to respond to them. “A Woman indeed can’t properly be said to Choose,” Astell commented. “All that is allow’d her, is to Refuse or Accept what is offer’d.”<sup>28</sup> The decision to refusal or acceptance was no casual affair. Woolley expected girls should defer to their parents in this most critical decision. “Of all the acts of Disobedience,” she reminded her readers, “that of

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<sup>25</sup> Patricia Brady, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794–1851* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 72.

<sup>26</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 352.

Marrying against the consent of Parents is the highest.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps Woolley believed that parents had a better grasp of a girl’s chances for lasting happiness and comfort than she would herself. Because of the inequality between men and women, a girl’s future safety and security lay in her husband’s hands. “Let the business be carried as Prudently as it can be on the Woman’s side,” Astell advised, for “a reasonable Man can’t deny that she has by much the harder bargain. Because she puts her self entirely into her Husband’s Power... neither Law nor Custom afford her that redress which a Man obtains.”<sup>30</sup> Parental oversight might prevent a disastrous error resulting from the wrong choice.

Once married, a woman became, according to Allestree, “a Wife, a Mother, and a Mistress.”<sup>31</sup> Her duties revolved around her husband and her growing family, and her already slim influence over her own life waned further. “She then who Marrys ought to lay it down for an indisputable Maxim,” Astell affirmed, “that her Husband must govern absolutely and intirely, and that she has nothing else to do but to Please and Obey... To struggle with her Yoke will only make it gall the more.”<sup>32</sup> Women who disregarded Astell’s “indisputable Maxim” posed a serious threat. They disagreed with more than just their husband’s authority. Their actions challenged the whole hierarchy that eighteenth-century thinkers, devoted to discovering and cataloguing the natural order of the universe, had established in the Great Chain of Being. Women, though ranked above animals and minerals, were firmly stationed below men. This order was clear to all. “You must first lay it down for a Foundation in general, That there is *Inequality in the Sexes*,” Savile stated, “and that for the better Oeconomy of the World, the *Men*,

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<sup>29</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 210.

<sup>30</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 357.

<sup>31</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 234.

<sup>32</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 386.

who were to be the Law-givers, had the larger share of *Reason* bestow'd upon them; by which means your Sex is the better prepar'd for the *Compliance* that is necessary for the better performance of those *Duties* which seem to be most properly assign'd to it."<sup>33</sup> Men, the reasonable, and women, the compliant, followed their assigned duties for the "better Oeconomy of the World." And in the South, the natural hierarchy sustained more than just a good "Oeconomy." It upheld the slave system.<sup>34</sup>

Slavery depended on fanatical attention to a hierarchical system that placed adult white males at its head. Any bend in the system—any challenge to the authority of white men—threatened to overturn the structure entirely. To maintain the hierarchy, women had to keep to their place. They sacrificed their physical and intellectual freedom to do so.<sup>35</sup> Because of limitations imposed by the slave system, southern women did not have the same lifestyle enjoyed by women in England or northern cities, or even in cities like Washington D.C., where women like Margaret Bayard Smith, who moved to the city in 1800, led cosmopolitan lives. Dolley Madison held cunning, cultivated drawing rooms that gave women in the early nineteenth century greater access to public spaces and, in turn, the political sphere of early Washington.<sup>36</sup> Urban British women could walk unescorted through city streets and in some cases received "intellectual encouragement" from literary salons. But women in the rural South lived isolated lives where their public appearances were chaperoned by men and few, if any, women had

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<sup>33</sup> Savile, *New-Year's Gift*, 143–144.

<sup>34</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 6, 76, 86.

access to vibrant, challenging intellectual discussion.<sup>37</sup> By curtailing their freedom, women acted in ways appropriate for their position on the hierarchy. Obedience and spirituality were two crucial components of correct behavior.

Allestree called on women's innate spirituality to support the natural order. "Let it be admitted, that in respect of their intellects they are below men;" he began, slotting women into their subordinate place, "yet sure in the sublimest part of humanity, they are their equals: they have souls of as divine an Original, as endless a Duration, and as capable of infinit Beatitude."<sup>38</sup> Only in spirituality could women equal men. Their spirituality, therefore, outranked all their other abilities. In the eighteenth-century formula, God bestowed different tasks to men and women and gave them different talents to adapt them to their work. Savile labeled men the law-givers because of their capacity for reason. He consigned women to duties unspecified beyond that they required a great deal of compliance, which women had been given in lieu of reason. There was no sense in disputing this. "Gods assignation has thus determined subjection to be the womens lot," Allestree set forth, "there needs no other argument of its fitness, or for their acquiescence."<sup>39</sup> His circular logic was unassailable. Women, built for submission and compliance, should be submissive and compliant.

Women who disapproved of this mandate had little recourse. Rather than buck the system and achieve no results, Hanway suggested a subtle approach to gaining influence. "As there can be no government where there is no ruler," he conceded, "she, who hath more sense than her husband, will shew it by her prudence, and fear of God; still yielding the superiority to him,

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<sup>37</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 43–44.

<sup>39</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 98.

whom God hath set over her: she may secretly govern him; but openly to assume the command, except in very extraordinary cases, is a proof that her understanding falls very short of the true mark.”<sup>40</sup> His recommendation made even deviant behavior conform to the hierarchy. Women who knew their own superiority should paradoxically demonstrate it by being obedient. Obedience to the natural order was the primary indicator of women’s understanding and rationality. A woman with more sense than her husband revealed an embarrassing dearth of understanding if she exercised that good sense over her foolish husband’s rule.

Women who followed the natural order, submitted to authority, and forbore from exercising their admitted superiority could expect to be rewarded with domestic peace and security. Even if women chose not to marry, or were not chosen to be married to, their happiness still stemmed from obedience. “Remember that whether thou shouldst marry or continue single,” Hanway wrote, “thy real sum of happiness will be proportionate to thy progress in virtuous attainments, and to the right performance of the several duties of that particular station, whatever it may be, in which the providence of God hath placed thee.”<sup>41</sup> Young or old, married or single, wed or widowed, women were to be obedient, dutiful, and submissive to some authority.

Within the restrictive system, women had little license for leisure. Even within the outlets available to them, their behavior was subject to scrutiny. Reading, though restricted by women’s limited literacy, was an activity made acceptable by its edifying purpose—if the right sort of books were read and novels were avoided, that is. “Reading furnisheth [women] with agreeable discourse,” Woolley wrote, “and adapts them for the conversation of the most ingenious.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Jonas Hanway, *Advice from Farmer Trueman, to his daughter Mary. In a Series of Discourses, Designed to Promote the Welfare and True Interest of Servants, with Reflections of no Less Importance to Masters and Mistresses* (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1810), 158–159.

<sup>41</sup> Hanway, *Farmer Trueman*, 163.

<sup>42</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 193.

Reading gave women something to talk about, as long as they were careful about choosing their subjects. Finding topics of conversation approached an art form in the eighteenth century.

Judicious reading could provide a witticism relevant to the topic at hand, which might include gardens, paintings, or travel.<sup>43</sup> Reading could quickly become an offensive habit, however, if women did not check their learning. Excessive education condemned women as masculine or unattractive. Even an appropriate level of learning too lavishly demonstrated earned disdain. Such displays called into question the virtue—and the chastity it represented—of overtly intelligent women.<sup>44</sup> Reading, with its potential to educate women beyond their station, needed boundaries. The choice of books that women read offered one such boundary.

Women had to choose their books carefully because not all books were beneficial. “Thou wilt always find amusement and instruction, in *reading*,” Hanway allowed, “provided thou makest choice of good and proper books; otherwise there is mischief also in these.”<sup>45</sup> In accusing books of malevolent mischief, Hanway may have been thinking of popular romances. Such books left “ill impressions” on “their unwary Readers.” Allestree supplied an example of a “poor young Creature” reading “of some triumphant Beauty, that has I know not how many captiv’d Knights prostrate at her feet” and, though the young reader “has not yet subdu’d one heart,” she will soon have “wound her self into an Amour.” To abet the affair, the romance novel “will instruct in the necessary Artifices of deluding Parents and Friends, and put her ruine perfectly in her own power.”<sup>46</sup> Romances offered lessons, but they offered all the wrong ones. They taught

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<sup>43</sup> Bushman, *Refinement*, 88–90.

<sup>44</sup> Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Hanway, *Farmer Trueman*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 219.

girls how to be bold rather than meek, to deceive rather than obey. “Novel reading has, I find, not only the ill effect of rendering people romantic...” wrote Theodosia Burr Alston from Petersburg, Virginia, in 1803, “but they really furnish no occupation to the mind. A series of events follow so rapidly, and are interwoven with remarks so commonplace and so spun out, that there is nothing left to reflect upon.”<sup>47</sup> Instead of turning to “hazardous” and unedifying romances when the “hours move heavily,” Hanway preferred “some pious or useful book” to help pass the time.<sup>48</sup> Only the “best Books” were considered appropriate fare. Such books would “conduce much towards thy eternal Happiness.”<sup>49</sup>

Reading pious books should deepen and safeguard a woman’s faith without causing her to question it. “Keep to the *Religion* that is grown up with you,” Savile advised, advocating an innocent, artless brand of female spirituality. “In respect that the Voluminous enquiries into the *Truth*, by Reading, are less expected from you. The *Best of Books* will be direction enough to you not to change... You will do best,” he warned, “to keep vain *Doubts* and *Scruples* at such a distance that they may give you no disquiet.” Rather than help them answer spiritual dilemmas or approach the mysteries of their faith, pious books simply reaffirmed women’s innate spirituality. “We hear good sermons, we read good books,” wrote Martha Laurens Ramsay in 1794 in Charleston, South Carolina, “but whole years of hearing and reading do not teach us so much of the vanity of the creature, and of our dependance on God, as the running dry of one spring of earthly enjoyment.” When the springs of earthly enjoyments ran dry, lessons “in the form of crosses” resulted. These lessons, Ramsay thought, offered more than any reading could. “In

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Van Doren, *Correspondence of Aaron Burr and His Daughter Theodosia* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1929), 130.

<sup>48</sup> Hanway, *Farmer Trueman*, 57; “hazardous” from Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 219.

<sup>49</sup> Evan Ellis, *The Advice of Evan Ellis, late of Chester County, deceased, to his daughter, when at sea*. Broadside. (Wilmington: James Adams, 1761).



reality, it is, till some of our comforts fail or forsake us, and we begin one way or other to feel very much alone in it; then we turn to God, and desire to find in him that rest to our souls, which we can find in nothing else.”<sup>50</sup> Rather than torment women with theological debates, the sort of spirituality that Ramsay proposed gave women rest from their worries. “A devout *Mind*,” Savile said, “hath the Privilege of being free from *Passions* as some Climates are from all venomous kind of Creatures. It will raise you above the little *Vexations* to which others for want of it, will be expos’d, and bring you to a *Temper*, not of stupid *Indifference*, but of such a wise *Resignation*.”<sup>51</sup> Faith would ease vexations and resign a woman to her lot in life. Religious reading material that had the power to cause disquieting doubts and scruples could be grouped with dangerous romances. So reading, though an acceptable diversion if the material was proper, was not a universally harmless activity.

Conversation and visiting, if not done to excess, was another fitting activity for women. “It is discourse,” Woolley wrote, “makes us pass over our tedious hours and days with delight.”<sup>52</sup> Conversation between women lightened the long days and reinforced bonds of friendship and community. But formal visiting had its drawbacks. “Mutual visits we know are an expression of respect, and should flow from a real kindness, but,” Allestree lamented, “if those now in use be sifted, how few will be found of that make. They are at the best formal, a tribute rather paid to custom than friendship, and many go to see those, for whom they are perfectly indifferent whether they find them alive or dead, well or sick. Nay very often they are worse then thus, design’d only to make observations, to bolt out something ridiculous wherewith to sport

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<sup>50</sup> David Ramsay, *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1812), 243.

<sup>51</sup> Savile, *New-Year’s Gift*, 141–142.

<sup>52</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 219.

themselves as soon as they are gon.” Allestree accused “modish” women of using their visits to refill their fonts of gossip, “their very civilities & caresses being often design’d to gain matter of scorn and laughter.”<sup>53</sup> Such women epitomized vanity and indifference, the opposite of such virtues as modesty and compassion.

Even husbands should be outraged at the time and money their wives wasted gadding about on these pointless visits. “In such a case,” Savile wrote,

when [her husband] findeth that after her *Emptiness* hath been extreme busie about some very senseless thing, she eats her Breakfast half an hour before Dinner, to be at greater liberty to afflict the Company with her Discourse; then calleth for her Coach, that she may trouble her Acquaintance, who are already cloy’d with her: And having some *proper Dialogues* ready to display her *Foolish Eloquence* at the top of the Stairs, she setteth out like a Ship out of the Harbour, laden with trifles and cometh back with them: at her return she repeateth to her faithful waiting-Woman, the *Triumphs* of that day’s *Impertinence*; then wrap’d up in Flattery and clean Linen, goeth to Bed so satisfied, that it throweth her into pleasant Dreams of her own Felicity. Such a one is seldom serious but with her *Taylor*... The *Mistaken Lady*, who thinketh to make *amends* for all this, by having a well-chosen *Petty-Coat*, will at last be convinced of her *Error*, and with grief be forced to undergo the Penalties that belong to those who are willfully *Insignificant*.<sup>54</sup>

Emptiness, vanity, and insignificance shadowed insincere visitors like Savile’s *Mistaken Lady*, who believed her elegant dress made up for her foolishness. In fact, as proof of her “emptiness,” a term he converted into a taunting moniker, a showy costume only added to her errors. “In your *Clothes* avoid too much Gaudy;” Savile cautioned. “Do not value your self upon an *Imbroidered Gown*; and remember, that a *reasonable Word*, or an *obliging Look*, will gain you more respect, than all your *fine Trappings*.” An intelligent man would see through the trappings. Though “very great *Beauty* may perhaps so dazle for a time, that Men may not so clearly see the *Deformity* of these *Affectations*,” men would eventually know a vain woman to be

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<sup>53</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> Savile, *New-Year’s Gift*, 167–168.

nothing more than “an *artificial Shrine* moved by *Wheels* and *Springs*, to delude him.”<sup>55</sup> In the same vein of late-eighteenth century thinking that designated women irrational in contrast to men’s rationality, women ought to be natural and unsoiled by worldliness, not artificial in their dress or affected in their manners.

Visiting and conversation, not intrinsically dubious activities, became questionable when their motive and execution led to vice rather than virtue. Reading novels led women to ruin. Reading difficult theological texts destroyed her innate spirituality. Women who dwelt too long on their dress or went too proudly on their visits crossed over the line to vanity. They sacrificed more than they gained by their actions. Such petty amusements, Astell reminded her readers, cured no ills. “A woman who seeks Consolation under Domestic troubles,” she wrote, “from the Gaieties of a Court, from Gaming and Courtship, from Rambling and odd Adventures, and the Amusements meer Company affords, may Plaister up the Sore, but will never heal it; nay, which is worse, she makes it Fester beyond a possibility of Cure.”<sup>56</sup> Activities outside the house could worsen domestic troubles. It should be a woman’s duty to stabilize her household through good management. “Since it is the Province allotted to your Sex,” Savile explained, “the *discharging it well*, will for that reason be expected from you, if you either desert it out of *Laziness*, or manage it ill for *want of skill*, instead of a *Help* you will be an *Incumbrance* to the *Family* where you are placed.”<sup>57</sup> Effective management smoothed distressing wrinkles from the household routine. Ineffective management bungled affairs and made husbands “uneasie.” Unfortunately for women, Astell noted, “uneasie” husbands “can find entertainments abroad... but neither

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<sup>55</sup> Savile, *New-Year’s Gift*, 175, 205.

<sup>56</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 335.

<sup>57</sup> Savile, *New-Year’s Gift*, 165.

Prudence nor Duty will allow a Woman to fly out, her Business and Entertainments are at home, and tho' he makes it ever so uneasie to her she must be content and make her best on't."<sup>58</sup> Men could escape unhappiness at home, but women had no such recourse. With their work centered in their homes, women had to find amusement and diversion there, too, or they risked their reputations by traversing social boundaries.

"Ladies need not be much at a loss how to entertain themselves," Allestree wrote optimistically, "nor run abroad in a Romantic Quest after Foreign Divertisements, when they have such variety of Engagements at Home."<sup>59</sup> Some of these engagements were undoubtedly repetitive and labor-intensive housekeeping responsibilities, but others, especially needlework, opened the way for women to participate in an activity without their virtue being questioned. Instead, needlework reaffirmed their femininity by enhancing and showcasing virtuous traits. "The exercise of the needle, at proper intervals," Burton explained, "is graceful in the Female Sex; and is well adapted to their constitutions and sedentary life."<sup>60</sup> Needlework was graceful instead of bold, obliging to women's lifestyle instead of destructive to it. Skill with a needle proved a woman's dedication to protecting her modesty, "the seat and dwelling-place of vertue."<sup>61</sup>

One way skill with a needle protected modesty was through the maintenance of clothing. Carelessness, and the dishevelment it resulted in, held the same stigma as vanity. "I may be bold to say," Hannah Woolley ventured, "you sin more in the sordidness of your Apparel, then in its

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<sup>58</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 360–361.

<sup>59</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 284.

<sup>60</sup> Burton, *Lectures*, 64.

<sup>61</sup> Eugenius Theodidactus [John Heydon], *Advice to a Daughter* (London: J. Moxon for Francis Cossinet, 1658. In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710, Volume 2*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 65.

splendours; and you will not lose in your reputations, by being cloth'd a little above your rank, rather than altogether beneath it.”<sup>62</sup> Women faced greater judgment for being careless with their dress than for dressing too well. “Dirt and filthiness fall within the observation of every one,” Hanway noted, “but neatness and cleanliness, like comeliness in person, is a silent recommendation. These are to the body, what purity is to the soul. Every young woman of sentiment naturally aspires at making a cleanly appearance.”<sup>63</sup> The outward appearance reflected on the soul. The tidy appearance of a woman “of sentiment” meant purity of spirit. Sordidness hinted at an unclean soul.

To preserve their reputations, women needed to do more than merely maintain their clothing. “Your Sex,” urged John Burton, writing in the last decade of the eighteenth century, “should be rather ambitious of preparing, as much as possible, the articles of your dress. You would certainly wear them with more pleasure, and, out of respect to your own labour, would be careful in preserving them. They would, at the same time, recommend your ingenuity and application.”<sup>64</sup> Invested with a woman’s labor, clothing could become a source of pleasure, not just practicality. Plus, the hours that went into creating or embellishing a garment acted as a buffer against its destruction by careless wear and as an incentive to fix small tears before they grew larger, the proverbial stitch in time. More importantly, a tidily dressed woman indicated her skill and devotion to the needle to potential suitors, men who might find “ingenuity” and “application” desirable traits in a wife.

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<sup>62</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 249.

<sup>63</sup> Hanway, *Farmer Trueman*, 129.

<sup>64</sup> Burton, *Lectures*, 66.

Women also had an inherent license to dress well. “It must not be denied but that the indulgence of Nature hath left a greater liberty to Women, than unto Men, in point of curiosity in Apparel,” wrote Woolley, suggesting that style of dress was an irrefutable natural law rather than a social construct. Obeying this dictum was fraught with consequences and meaning. For women, having freedom with dress was “a priviledg which men ought not to envy them, because whatever imbellishment she bestows on her own beauty, is to be supposed an effect of that great love she would shew to man, by endeavouring and studying how to shew her self most complaisant, grateful, and acceptable to man. And yet Nature hath limited this priviledg of Women with strict Laws.”<sup>65</sup> The “strict Laws” prevented vanity, so that a woman who dressed carefully could safely be assumed to have nothing but “great love” for man. Her dress meant to display her agreeableness, not her vanity.

Careful dressing included attention to the swiftly changing fashion and variety of current modes. “For example, should you now wear a Farthingal,” Woolley warned, “or narrow-brim’d Hat with a long crown, and a strutting Ruff (it is not long since such things were in fashion), a Jack-pudding could not attract more Boys after him, than would follow you. Or should you always keep in one fashion, you would be laught at for your singularity, almost as much as others for their profuseness.” Though the particulars of her statement were long out of fashion by the end of the eighteenth century, when no one had been wearing ruffs for more than a century, the idea held true. Fashions changed. Neatness included attention to the current mode. Such attention, however, should never be taken to extremes. “And indeed it is a great fault in our Sex,” Woolley concluded, “being very much inclin’d to pride it in sin with what our merciful Creator bestow’d upon us to cover our shame... It matters not whether the quality of your Habits be

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<sup>65</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 243.

Silken or Woollen, so they be civil and not wanton.”<sup>66</sup> The critical designation of clothing was not its material but whether it was “civil”—appropriate and tasteful—or “wanton”—gaudy and cheap.

George Savile, too, advised women to tread the delicate line between vanity and slovenliness. He sneered at the woman who depended on an “*Imbroidered Gown*” or “*fine Trappings*” to be respected. “This is not said,” he cautioned, “to restrain you from a *decent Compliance* with the World, provided you take the wiser, and not the foolisher part of your Sex for your Pattern.” The wiser women, in Savile’s opinion, knew the limits of “decent Compliance” and dressed appropriately, modestly, and neatly without resorting to vain fripperies. Foolish women used fashion as a distraction from their failings. “A Woman is not to be proud of her fine Gown;” Savile wrote, “nor when she hath less Wit than her Neighbours, to comfort her self that she hath more Lace.”<sup>67</sup> Furbelows would never make up for lack of good sense and, Allestree suggested, be no more than a “Fallacy” covering a “putrid body” and a “more putrid soul.”

Allestree spared no harsh words for well-dressed women. He asserted that “their most exquisite deckings are but like the garlands on a beast design’d for Sacrifice.” Their fancy clothes suggested empty souls, too. Allestree claimed that when a woman “has by pious vows and resolutions *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*... ‘twill be impossible for her to be very anxiously careful about her garments.” Allestree, like Savile, recognized that not all women were hopelessly vain. He pushed the modest to be models for the vain. “I can suggest but one way more for women of honor to vindicate their Sex,” he wrote, “and that is by making their own

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<sup>66</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 246, 241.

<sup>67</sup> Savile, *New-Year’s Gift*, 175, 206.

vertue as illustrious as they can; and by the bright shine of that, draw off mens eies from the worser prospect.”<sup>68</sup> Women in the South may not have read these exact ideas in Allestree’s words. Given the popularity of Bibles and religious commentaries in southern homes, however, it is not impossible that some women were familiar with the conflict between vanity in dress and the humility of Christian living. These lessons may have been heard by southern women in a different way than by their New England counterparts who came from a society more deeply aligned with a religion that endorsed restraint, sacrifice, and mortification of the flesh. So while the message itself may not have differed widely between New England and the South, or even between England and the South, the reception of the message would have been flavored by the different experiences and social backgrounds of the women who read or knew about these works.

If not swayed by religious threats like New England women might have been, women in the South could also attend the more worldly motivations associated with virtuous living. Since men’s eyes were the judge of both virtue and vanity, decency could even attract husbands. “In order to Marriage, such a moderation is much likelier to succeed than the contrary extravagance,” Allestree wrote. “Among the prudenter sort of Men I am sure it is... For certainly, he that chuses a Wife for those qualities for which a wise Man would refuse her, understands so little what Marriage is, as portends no great felicity to her that shall have him. But if they desire to marry Men of sobriety and discretion, they are obliged in justice to bring the same qualities they expect, which will be very ill evidenced by that excess and vanity.”<sup>69</sup>

Prudent, wise men recognized important wifely qualities in a woman who eschewed “excess and vanity.” Similarly, looking into a future that held constant work to create, maintain, repair, or

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<sup>68</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 80, 179, 84.

<sup>69</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 222.



replace clothing and household textiles, a prudent man saw the skills needed by a competent wife evinced in a neatly dressed young woman. “The neatness and property of your Clothes,” wrote Woolley, “may be said to shew a great part of your breeding.”<sup>70</sup> Because of this, dressing well is “the one Science wherein a young Lady is to be perfectly verst.”<sup>71</sup> Still, vanity was a dangerous temptation that made a woman false. When affectation replaced the natural grace that represented true beauty, a woman’s modesty—and the sexual purity that modesty represented—was compromised. “I charge thee... not to indulge any desire of being *gaudily attired*,” Hanway wrote. “If thou shouldst feel thine heart incline to this vanity, get theyself cured of it, as a disease, which if neglected will prove mortal.”<sup>72</sup>

For women who wanted to dress well or showcase their talents without accusations of vanity, needlework presented an outlet. “There cannot, I confess, be a more pleasing sight,” Burton effused, “than to see a circle of young Ladies, busily employed in ingenious works, whilst one of them is reading aloud to the rest.”<sup>73</sup> Few other activities garnered such unrestrained approbation from writers. It was a perfectly appropriate activity even to the extent that people believed “that women [were] selected by nature for needlework.” By the eighteenth century, the idea that needlework and embroidery were wholesome, natural acts that sprang from women’s true nature was a longstanding belief.<sup>74</sup> A woman working with her needle was the passive, pliable, industrious figure that husbands desired. She was also visible, exhibiting her good traits

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<sup>70</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 240.

<sup>71</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 221.

<sup>72</sup> Hanway, *Farmer Trueman*, 150.

<sup>73</sup> Burton, *Lectures*, 68.

<sup>74</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women’s Press, 1984), 60.

through her work. The product of her needle made sure that her good qualities did not go unnoticed, yet doing so without the vain, attention-seeking manner of gaudy dress. Still, needlework presented some of the same danger towards vanity as “*too much glittering* in what you wear.”<sup>75</sup> In the early nineteenth century, some writers worried that needlework opened too wide the gate for middling families to join the elite. Embroidery, closely linked with wealth and status, carried those connotations to anyone who practiced it, and some practitioners had an overreaching air about them.<sup>76</sup>

Most needleworkers, however, had a pleasing, submissive, gentle air about them. Doing needlework held women in appropriate postures. Creating needlework pictures or working on samplers kept girls seated primly with their eyes on their work, both suitable, submissive positions to adopt in company. Eighteenth-century writers thought stationary pursuits suited women better than almost any activity save dancing. Margaret Bayard Smith described an evening of such suitable entertainments in an 1814 letter. “In the evening some gentlemen dropped in and we were unusually gay,” she wrote, “the children danced, Mrs. Clay and Mr. Taylor sang for them while they danced, then Mr. Smith and Mr. Fisk played checkers, Ann and Mrs. Stevens chess, Susan and I sewed,—this easy, social, gay manner of passing the evening is better than a ball.”<sup>77</sup> Dancing, games, and sewing made up a pleasant evening in company.

These suggestions pertained only to wealthy women who could afford to remain at leisure. Other women, some of them enslaved, did laundry, baked bread, or kept gardens without regard to how it affected their postures. Women unburdened by such pressing requirements had

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<sup>75</sup> Savile, *New-Year's Gift*, 175–176.

<sup>76</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 152–153.

<sup>77</sup> Gaillard, *Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith*, 93.

to find appropriate ways to be active, ways that would not let them be confused with the sort of woman whose daily round of chores kept her physically active. For these women, Burton recommended dancing because it could “be considered as affording you that kind of exercise, which you seem to require more than the other sex; because your employments are more sedentary, and your amusements less athletic.”<sup>78</sup> Burton seemed to see no tangled logic in his statement, which discouraged activity at the same time as it troubled over the solution for lack of exercise. He was not alone, however, in thinking that women should refrain from violent activity. Jefferson, in a letter to his daughter Maria said “a lady should never ride a horse she might not safely ride without a bridle,” and he hoped she would “never be venturesome” with her new mount.<sup>79</sup>

Denied the outlet of adventurous physical activity, doing needlework gave women an active outlet for their creativity, keeping dullness and idleness at bay by allowing mental exploration where physical exploration was discouraged. Burton noted that “the exercise of the needle will serve to fill up many of the vacant hours of life.”<sup>80</sup> Though he also wrote positive assertions of the practicality of needlework, at root, he viewed it as a mere occupier of time, something mindless for women to do so that they would not be overcome with boredom. Fancy needlework, a province of the wealthy, was work women did to appear as though they did not have to work. Even the subject matter of some embroideries drew on this theme. The figures of leisured ladies accompanied by servants, attendants, and milkmaids became popular embroidery motifs in the mid-eighteenth century. Actions differentiated the ladies in these scenes from the

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<sup>78</sup> Burton, *Lectures*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Henry Stephens Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson: Volume II* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858), 19.

<sup>80</sup> Burton, *Lectures*, 65.

other figures. Milkmaids and shepherds worked. Ladies appeared at leisure. Their affluence became visible in their actions, their femininity asserted by their repose.<sup>81</sup>

But Burton promoted needlework and not, for example, horseback riding. This suggests that there were appropriate and inappropriate ways of quelling boredom and also that boredom must be quelled. Expressing boredom was a sure sign of bad manners. “In dull company, and in dull weather, for instance,” Thomas Jefferson wrote to daughter, Martha, in 1787, “it is ill-manners to read, it is ill-manners to leave them; no card-playing there among genteel people—that is abandoned to blackguards. The needle is then a valuable resource. Besides,” he added, “without knowing how to use it herself, how can the mistress of a family direct the work of her servants?”<sup>82</sup> In this way, needlework elevated its practitioners above servants, allowing them to stitch without being linked to servitude. In the South, this distinction had a racial layer to it as well as elite women adopted genteel tasks that set them apart from the chores assigned to enslaved women.

Needlework gave women the appearance of being calm. The projects, which could take months or years to complete, added a layer of continuity to the practice. The repetitive, slow movements of the needle gave the stitcher an air of complacency and patience. Allestree commented on the propriety of a woman’s calm demeanor, which he defined as a “branch of Mekness.” Achieving his recommended balance of the “Affections... consists in reducing the passions to a temper and calmness, not suffering them to make uproars within to disturb ones self, nor without to the disquieting of others.”<sup>83</sup> It also gave women something to look at while

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<sup>81</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 113.

<sup>82</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 136.

<sup>83</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 100.

they talked with others. “A wanton Eye,” warned Woolley, “is the truest evidence of a wandering and distracted mind.”<sup>84</sup> *The Lady’s New-Year’s Gift*, too, warned women of the dangers of a wandering glance. “To the *Men* you are to have a *Behaviour* which may secure you,” Savile wrote, including “*Looks* that forbid without *Rudeness*, and oblige without *Invitation*, or leaving room for the sawcy Inferences Men’s Vanity suggesteth to them upon the least Encouragements. This is so very nice,” Savile continued, using the word *nice* in the sense of being strict or particular, “that it must engage you to have a perpetual *Watch* upon your *Eyes*, and to remember, that one careless *Glance* giveth more advantage than a *hundred Words* not enough considered; the *Language* of the *Eyes* being very much the most *significant*, and the most *observed*.”<sup>85</sup> By giving them a point to which they might direct their gaze, needlework allowed women to exert more control over the language of their eyes. They had an excuse to look away and something to focus on to make sure their glances were never careless.

Needlework managed glances, posture, and temper. By forming women along the socially acceptable contours of behavior, it also protected virtue. But the practice of needlework was a balancing act, not purely driven by conformity. It allowed women to exhibit talent and learning while still being obedient. It encouraged neatness, not vanity, in dress. It helped them safeguard their virtue and modesty. Needlework had another element, too, one that did not align so perfectly with the ideals of submissive femininity. It gave women a purchase on the creativity, choice, activity, and agency denied to them through other routes. The next chapter explores the creative aspect of needlework and the context of practical application that, added to the social commendation from the ideal world in the advice books, allowed this creativity to flourish.

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<sup>84</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 225.

<sup>85</sup> Savile, *New-Year’s Gift*, 183.

## Chapter Two: Practicality, Creativity

The practice of needlework protected virtue because it conformed to late eighteenth and early nineteenth ideals of socially acceptable feminine behavior. The words of popular advice manuals upheld needlework as an appropriate activity for women, better than reading novels or going through the expense and trouble of visiting. Needlework offered all the positive associations with work—patience, diligence, and obedience—while avoiding the negative ones that clung to the hard physical labor performed by servants or slaves. It occupied women in a manner neither frivolous nor degrading. Needlework also symbolized taste, leisure, and wealth. Ornamental embroidery could not be practiced without instruction. Knowledge of fine stitches displayed participation in this instruction, which in turn demonstrated that a girl's family could afford to part with her labor so she could receive it. Besides this, needlework, even fancywork done in company, reflected women's competence as household managers and their ability to care for the textiles that filled their genteel homes. This chapter investigates two aspects of the role elite women had in caring for household textiles, first looking in to how they learned the necessary skills to manage a household and then considering what textiles would be part of the household and what the presence of those textiles meant. Finally, behind the shield of practicality and taste, women used needlework to express their creativity, an otherwise dangerous impulse. By advocating needlework as an acceptable exercise for women's hands and minds, the advice books allowed women to undertake a formidable creative enterprise and gave them considerable latitude for expressing themselves when other avenues of expression were discouraged. This chapter begins to investigate broadly the application of this creativity, a theme that is addressed

in a more specific context in the third chapter with the examination of the Richmond Theatre Fire Sampler.

Girls ideally spent their childhood learning, practicing, and perfecting the skills and rules that constrained their adulthood. The manner in which girls earned an education, as well as the subjects and skills she learned, varied depending on her family's financial standing. Girls learned how to organize and manage a home from their mothers, grandmothers or sisters, in more formal settings in classrooms or from tutors, or in female apprenticeships. In female apprenticeships, girls were sent out to another household to learn essential skills, perhaps ones her mother had not perfected. In doing so, she assisted another family, often one whose children were grown and living away from home, and eased the strain in her own household, which may have an overabundance of children living at home.

The idealized situation, according to the authors of prescriptive literature, was that girls would learn the importance of work and the diligence to complete it from their mothers, who taught their children by example. "Be obedient to thy dear Mother," Evan Ellis wrote to his daughter while he was at sea, "and take her Advice, for she hath known much of the Disappointments of this World."<sup>86</sup> Mothers, wise from experience, had much to teach. By watching their mothers work, children "will be witnesses to how they dispose their Time," wrote Richard Allestree, "that they neither lose it by doing nothing, nor yet misemploy it by doing ill... if Children be permitted to trifle away their Time, they will soon learn to trifle away their Innocence also." Never wholly given to optimism, Allestree did warn parents that the "doting

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<sup>86</sup> Evan Ellis, *The Advice of Evan Ellis, late of Chester County, deceased, to his daughter, when at sea*. Broadside. (Wilmington: James Adams, 1761), 1.

affection of the Mother, is frequently punish'd with the untimely death of her Children.”<sup>87</sup>

Hanway, who wrote to his daughter, bemoaned that “your dear mother is gone before me; and left me to act for her: and happy it is for you that I am alive; for young women... when left parentless, are so much at their own *disposal*, that they often dispose of themselves very badly.”<sup>88</sup> Without a mother to set a good example of hard work, children would fall to idleness.

Hannah Woolley thought learning to keep oneself occupied should be part of a girl's education, a skill that added to others as girls matured and learned the skills of adulthood. “And as I gather'd how to manage my tongue gracefully, and discreetly,” Woolley wrote of her own education, “so I thought it irrequisite to let my hands lye idle.” Appropriate speech and manners came first. Once those had been mastered, it became suddenly inappropriate for her to sit with idle hands. Children learned, too, to be occupied when they sat with adults. “Sit not before your betters,” Woolley chided, “unless you are so desired, and unless you are at meat, working, or writing.”<sup>89</sup> Working or writing gave children an excuse to be around adults, who otherwise might not tolerate their presence.

A girl's education included either a working or, if she was so advantaged, a managerial knowledge of cooking, cleaning, and obtaining and maintaining clothing and household textiles.<sup>90</sup> Depending on the skills of their teachers, girls might receive specialized instruction in

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<sup>87</sup> Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling in Two Parts. By the Author of the Whole Duty of Man, &c.*, fifth impression (Oxford, 1677. In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710, Volume 3*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 268–269, 259.

<sup>88</sup> Jonas Hanway, *Advice from Farmer Trueman, to his daughter Mary. In a Series of Discourses, Designed to Promote the Welfare and True Interest of Servants, with Reflections of no Less Importance to Masters and Mistresses* (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1810), 9.

<sup>89</sup> Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewoman's Companion; or, a Guide to the Female Sex* (London, 1675. In *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640–1710, Volume 4*, edited by William St Clair and Irmgard Maassen. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 199, 206.

<sup>90</sup> Gloria Seaman Allen, *A Maryland Sampling: Girlhood Embroidery 1738–1860* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society), xiii.



dairying, gardening, or sewing and fancy needlework. Hannah Woolley included needlework as part of her ideal curriculum, proposed in opposition to “most in this depraved later Age [who] think a Woman learned and wise enough if she can distinguish her Husbands Bed from anothers.” Finding this insufficient, Woolley favored reading and writing for girls. She couched these skills as adjuncts to more refined talents like fancy needlework. Girls’ instructors “should so practice them in their pen as not to be ignorant in a *Point de Venice* & all the Productions of the Needle, with all the curious devices of *Wax-Work*, *Rock-work*, *Moss work*, *Cabinet-work*, *Beugle-work* &c. and in due time let them know how to Preserve, Conserve, Distil; with those laudable Sciences which adorn a compleat Gentlewoman.”<sup>91</sup> Needlework, one of the necessary skills that adorned and completed a gentlewoman, helped provide the foundation and fortification for her virtues. In the South, access to higher levels of specialized education was bound up in the slave system. In order for girls to have the time to learn fancy needlework and then, later, to practice it, the heavy household work needed to be attended to by others. In theory, slave labor released women from some burdensome household chores, giving them time for their leisurely, genteel pursuits.<sup>92</sup> Not all women, of course, found that owning slaves freed them from work. Slave labor added other chores to their agendas and increased the scope and responsibilities of their household management. One women in South Carolina in 1780 disclosed in a letter that “Our Negroes have every one been at the point of death, so that they have been of

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<sup>91</sup> Woolley, *Gentlewoman’s Companion*, 187, 195.

<sup>92</sup> Marla Miller, *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 101.

no use to me for thise six weeks past.” Because of this, “I am obliged to take in needle worke to make a living for my family, so I leave you to judge what a livinge that must be.”<sup>93</sup>

Even girls from wealthy households who might reasonably expect to be spared the physical aspect of the work by assuming a managerial position did well to pay close attention to their lessons. By the end of the eighteenth century, household skills were becoming signs of virtue rather than just signs of a tidy house. Conceptions of the motivations behind housework had changed as the eighteenth century progressed. Housework became increasingly symbolic of a family’s “love and goodwill” in the nineteenth century.<sup>94</sup> Success as a housekeeper advertised women’s virtue as much as it did their knowledge of a special way to make a ham or darn a sock. Housework protected virtue, too. It kept women at home and prevented them from accumulating dangerous amounts of book learning. In this way, a woman’s simplicity and domesticity symbolized her sexual purity.<sup>95</sup> Since girls most frequently expressed disobedience through sexual misbehavior—even though in Virginia there was much greater concern for such escapades than there were actual escapades—parents had significant motivation to raise domestic, obedient daughters.<sup>96</sup>

Besides the abstraction of protecting virtue, needlework and knowledge of textiles served a practical function. These went hand in hand, but the practical function would still exist even without the abstraction. The abstraction, however, rested in part on the ubiquity of sewing in women’s lives. Without the need to be constantly sewing, it seems less likely that sewing would

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<sup>93</sup> Jacob R. Marcus, ed., *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1981), 30.

<sup>94</sup> Martha Saxton, *Being Good: Women’s Moral Values in Early America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 21.

<sup>95</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women’s Press, 1984), 75

<sup>96</sup> Saxton, *Being Good*, 100.

have come to exemplify women's virtue. Textiles filled the early American home and covered early American bodies. Wardrobes expanded, making use of the great variety of fabrics made available through new manufacturing processes. Most fabrics, both functional and fancy, were imported from England or France, which procured specialty fabrics from India or China. Some cloth was woven on American soil, but even the most ambitious and dedicated New England weaver did not create all the cloth her family required. Besides, American looms could not produce the delicate and ornate fabrics desired by elite women for their wardrobes.<sup>97</sup> For the silk, fine linen, and brightly colored cotton prints required for fashionable clothing, women relied on imports. Imported fabric was a signifier of wealth and luxury unavailable to girls from less affluent families and, especially, to servants and slaves.

Households required a variety of textiles. Mann Page, living near Fredericksburg, Virginia, sent an order in 1770 to the London merchant house of John Norton. His order demonstrated the types of fabrics needed and the variety of their uses, as well as the reliance on imported fabrics of all types and for all purposes. Among others, he requested fustian, cambric, Holland, linen, fine Duroy, calico, duffle, cotton, and oznabrigs. These fabrics would be used to make "Wastecoats," coats for the servants, shirts, handkerchiefs, and other clothing required by the family. In addition, Page ordered finished goods like gloves, hats, stockings, and a pair of "Doe Skin Breeches." Leather breeches might outlast cloth ones, especially for "a Youth 21 Yr. Old" who desired a high quality hunting saddle. Page also called for household textiles, including "coarse Callico for Quilts," a "large Scotch Carpet," several "large Diaper Tablecloths," and a "large feather Bed Bolsters & Pillows." Fabric for clothing and pieces like rugs and tablecloths made up the majority of the textile order, but cloth items appeared in

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<sup>97</sup> Miller, *Needle's Eye*, 35.

unexpected places, too. Several pieces of “Twilled Sacken” would be made into bags, and the lawn, a tightly-woven linen, was intended for use in kitchen sieves.<sup>98</sup>

Virginia families desired fashionable, high quality fabrics, even if the hangings fell short of the design books suggestions. In 1771, Peter Lyons, a tobacco farmer in Virginia, desired London merchant John Norton to send him “one peice of blue grounded Cotton of a large Pattern for a Bed with suitable binding” and “one smaller peice of blue grounded Cotton of the same sort for Window Curtains.” He reminded Norton of the inferior goods he received the previous year from some of Norton’s tradesmen. “I know they think anything good enough for Virginia,” Lyons complained, “but they should be informed better, and be made to know that the people in Virginia have a good taste and know when they are imposed on, as well if not better than most of their Gentry or Quality in England.”<sup>99</sup> Lyons’s order of stylish fabric for matching bed hangings and window curtains backed up his assertion that his taste equaled that of the English gentry. He knew both which fabrics to order, how to determine if they were high quality or not, and how to display them in his home. His correspondence with Norton serves also as a reminder that the procurement and care of textiles was not entirely the province of women. Men performed duties that women could not, such as engaging in overseas trade. The voice of women in the long order sheets is one of suggestion rather than demand. It could be a wife or sister who desired the matching curtains to decorate her home, and it could be the complaints of those same women that led Lyons to assert that Virginians knew “when they are imposed on.”

Though men helped get household textiles across the ocean and into the home, women took charge from there. Many textiles arrived in a form that needed alteration before use. Not all

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<sup>98</sup> Frances Norton Mason, *John Norton & Sons: Merchants of London and Virginia, Being the Papers from their Counting House for the Years 1750 to 1795* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, 1968), 124–126.

<sup>99</sup> Mason, *John Norton*, 188–190.

these transformations turned cloth into clothing. Fabrics might appear in every room of an eighteenth-century home. Fabric decorating a home designated its owners as wealthy, especially if the fabric was rich in texture, color, or design. Bed hangings, featuring great swaths of fabric artfully draped across the bed frame or hung on rods by rings, provided a centerpiece of ostentatious home textile display. Beds were often the most expensive piece of furniture in the home, and in some cases the hangings were worth more than the bedstead that suspended them.<sup>100</sup> While design books recommended lavish styles, in reality, hangings might deviate from the designers' intentions and be simplified or modified to use less fabric or require less complicated support structures.<sup>101</sup> A fully dressed bed called for up to fifty yards of fabric in the form of valances, curtains, a headcloth, and curtains, all of which could be embellished or embroidered to add to their value. The hangings, when richly embroidered or made from fine fabric, made bold statements of the wealth and taste of their owners when compared with the unadorned hangings, or the lack thereof, in poorer households. Crewelwork, embroidery using colored woolen yarn, was more popular for decorating bed hangings in New England than the southern colonies, where women preferred materials and techniques that produced lighter effects.<sup>102</sup> Instead of crewelwork, for example, bed hangings could be made from especially pretty fabrics, highlighting the colors of the print and the family's access to rich textiles. Hangings made up just one component of the textiles required to dress a bed. Beds also called for textiles in the form of sheets, either linen or cotton, and blankets, rugs, quilts, or counterpanes.

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<sup>100</sup> Rosemary Krill and Pauline K. Eversmann, *Early American Decorative Arts 1620–1860* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2001), 76.

<sup>101</sup> Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650–1870* (New York: Norton, 2007), 16–18.

<sup>102</sup> Mildred Davis, *Early American Embroidery Designs* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1969), 38.

Sheets required significant, but not difficult, labor before they made up a bed. Two narrow lengths of fabric had to be stitched together to make the sheet wide enough to cover the bed. Any woman with basic sewing skills could make up sheets because the stitch used to join them was a simple one. Still, the project took time because of the length of the seams. The project could be interleaved with other tasks, making it difficult to ascertain how long it took to perform one task stripped of its interruptions. After being sewn, sheets were frequently marked with the initials of their owners. Marking sheets kept matched sets together and identified them if they were sent out to be washed. Making alphabets on girlhood samplers taught girls the shapes of letters that they could stitch later to mark textiles in their own households. This restricted the skill to women who had been taught decorative stitches and knew their alphabets.

Because of the labor required to prepare sheets, they were valuable beyond the worth of the fabric that went into them. Mrs. Bennet, the wife of Thomas Bennet, withheld “several pair of Sheets” from the appraisers who came to inventory her husband’s estate in 1750. The sheets may have had particular value to her because they were new or made of particularly high quality material, but she may have wanted to keep them because she had invested her time into sewing them up and marking them.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, Margaret Bayard Smith, whose life is not representative of southern women’s more general experience both in that she was socially and politically active in Washington, D.C. and in that she left written records of her life, wrote in 1801 that she preferred to leave the “sewing of the family” to her servant and watch the children herself. She would do this “even if [the servant] did not sew as well as I did,” because, she explained, “I have always been of opinion that mistakes or negligence in this department of household business was less disadvantageous to domestic order and comfort, than in either the

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<sup>103</sup> Inventory of Thomas Bennet taken 22 November 1750. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “York County Probate Inventories,” Colonial Williamsburg Digital Libraries, <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=Probates\PB00507.xml>

care of children, or in economical arrangements.”<sup>104</sup> The “sewing of the family” that Smith refers to was likely the simple yet time-consuming tasks such as making up sheets or performing repairs on everyday clothes. Since Smith notes that she herself might be more adept with the needle than her servant, the fact that she left some sewing to her servant did not preclude her from all sewing. In 1804, she wrote that “altho' I sew all the morning and evening, yet the interruptions from company, from family calls, from Julia &c are so frequent, that I found my work go behind hand.” This kind of sewing, frequently interrupted, “induced me to get a woman to work whenever it was necessary. I... shall get her to do all my large work in the course of a week or two and shall then have leisure for my little things.”<sup>105</sup> Even if a wealthy woman sent work out, she would suffer if she did not know enough to demand quality workmanship, set reasonable deadlines, and pay appropriately. In her letter, Smith noted how much she would pay and how long she thought the work would take, and she indicated that she understood how to separate tasks: large work went out for a hired woman to tackle, little projects stayed in to be done by the mistress’s leisured hand.

Unlike sheets, blankets were customarily bought whole. The cloth, usually woolen, was woven in great lengths on the loom, stripes marking the beginning and end of the blanket segments. When the blankets were taken off the loom and cut apart, the stripes served as decoration on the finished product. Some blankets had designs, compasses or crowns, stitched on them after they were taken off the loom but before they went to the fuller. These stitched designs, fulled with the blanket, became part of the fabric. One blanket of this type held in a private collection in Virginia, with a blue crown stitched above a brown stripe, indicates that

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<sup>104</sup> Gaillard Hunt, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society in the Family Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1906), 33.

<sup>105</sup> Hunt, *Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith*, 45.

such blankets were imported to Virginia as well as New England, where they were tremendously popular. Rose blankets, heavy, fulled blankets with a compass design in one corner, were also brought to Virginia. In 1768, R. C. Nicholas, a Virginia tobacco farmer, requested “3 Pr. best and finest double mill’d rose large Bed Blankets” from John Norton.<sup>106</sup> Rose blankets were popular enough through the early nineteenth century that some women copied the compass design onto plain blankets, embroidering a homemade version of a commercial product.<sup>107</sup>

Bed rugs were more common than quilts which, in the eighteenth century, covered bodies more often than beds. The quilting frame listed in Thomas Bennet’s 1750 probate inventory could be used to make either quilted petticoats or quilted bed coverings.<sup>108</sup> Though quilted petticoats were more common than bed quilts, some quilts were intended for warmth at night. In 1795, a Virginia woman made a bed quilt with a floral pattern appliquéd in chintz fabrics.<sup>109</sup> The quilt, with a large central design surrounded by two serpentine vine borders, resembles the embroidered designs of many eighteenth-century bed rugs, differing from them only in technique. Women in the Byrd and Harrison families of Berkeley and Westover plantations in Virginia collaborated in 1770 on a bed cover that used patchwork and appliqué techniques to create the fabric, which was then decorated with embroidered motifs. Though patchwork and appliqué are quilting techniques, the bed cover was not quilted in the traditional sense, with short, overall stitches holding layers of fabric and batting together.<sup>110</sup> Wholecloth quilts, in which

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<sup>106</sup> Mason, *John Norton*, 71–72.

<sup>107</sup> Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 169–171.

<sup>108</sup> Inventory of Thomas Bennet taken 22 November 1750. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “York County Probate Inventories,” <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=Probates\PB00507.xml>

<sup>109</sup> Amelia Peck, *American Quilts & Coverlets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: MQ Publications USA, 2007), 261.

<sup>110</sup> Davis, *Embroidery Designs*, 72, 96.



the entire quilt was made from a single piece of fabric, showcased this technique. Quilted petticoats were also made in this manner. Wholecloth quilts used quilting stitches to draw attention to the color or luster of the fabric. Calimanco, a glossy woolen fabric, was a favorite for both quilted coverlets and quilted petticoats. Sometimes a quilt served both purposes, being made initially to serve as clothing and then repurposed for use as a bed covering once embroidered petticoats fell from fashion.<sup>111</sup> Bed rugs, thicker and heavier than blankets, could be embroidered with an all-over pattern or with intricate floral designs, but not all bed rugs were embellished.<sup>112</sup> Even a plain rug, however, added to the value of the bed.

Flush with textiles, many of them costly imports and some richly embroidered, beds made a serious statement about the affluence of their owners. In the early eighteenth century, people kept their beds in the same rooms where they worked, ate, and sat with visitors. Then, the bed hangings offered privacy at the same time as they displayed wealth. Their visual prominence in the house might explain why they are frequently the first objects listed on probate inventories. The 1750 inventory of Thomas Cobb had two beds at the top of the list.<sup>113</sup> In 1760, the appraisers who took the inventory of Lewis Bolton counted two bedsteads before the rest of his belongings. The beds, heavy with textiles, included sheets, “Dutch blankets,” bolsters, a “Cotton Counterpin,” and a bed rug, though it did not specify if the bed rug was embroidered or not.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Peck, *American Quilts*, 273, 308.

<sup>112</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 226.

<sup>113</sup> Inventory of Thomas Cobb taken 1 October 1750. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “York County Probate Inventories,” Colonial Williamsburg Digital Libraries, <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=Probates\PB00503.xml>

<sup>114</sup> Inventory of Lewis Bolton taken 1 December 1760. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “York County Probate Inventories,” Colonial Williamsburg Digital Libraries, <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=Probates\PB00147.xml>

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, as houses grew larger and rooms became specialized, beds retreated to bedchambers, taking with them the ostentatious display of rich textiles from the common rooms, though some southern homes kept the beds in their parlors even into the early nineteenth century.<sup>115</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, bed hangings had fallen from fashion, curtains on the bed being associated with the closeness and still air that precipitated ill health.<sup>116</sup>

Though beds often formed the centerpiece of textiles displayed in the home, fabrics decorated more than beds. Window curtains, though rare among the general population in the eighteenth century, were not uncommon for wealthy households. The simple curtains of the seventeenth century, not much more than a length of fabric that could be pulled to one side to let in light, evolved through the eighteenth century into elaborate decorative constructions with upholstered valances, swags, and tassels. Appearing first in the “best parlor” of the house, curtains spread into more rooms by the nineteenth century. Then, as rooms developed for specialized purposes, the type of fabric chosen for each room depended on its function, on the type of wood featured in it, and on the upholstery of the furniture in it.<sup>117</sup> Even in 1771, Peter Lyons was careful to match the fabric of the bed hangings he ordered with that of the window curtains. Clearly, only wealthy households had to worry about these finicky design specifications, but poorer households could mimic richer ones through textile use. Hanging curtains over the windows in the best parlor was one way to demonstrate an appreciation for fashionable trends. Even if the fabric used for the curtains was inexpensive and their design was

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<sup>115</sup> Krill, *Decorative Arts*, 259.

<sup>116</sup> Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 43.

<sup>117</sup> Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 49, 69, 73.

plain in comparison to those in more affluent homes, curtains could be admired both from inside and outside.

Table linens, rather than window curtains, were often the first luxury textile purchases made by less affluent families.<sup>118</sup> Tablecloths and napkins, small enough to be affordable, still made textiles a visual presence in the home. Covering a table with a cloth spoke volumes for the taste and gentility of those seated around it. John Roberts, who died in 1720, had four tablecloths in his estate. Two were “course,” one was huckabuck, a linen fabric commonly used for toweling, and another, cheaper than the huckabuck cloth, was made of an unspecified material and paired with a dozen napkins.<sup>119</sup> Not all tablecloths came with napkins. Without them, the tablecloth itself served as a napkin, though fancy tablecloths were probably reserved for special occasions and saved from such hard use. Fancy cloths covered cupboards, too. This way, the textiles could be displayed while protecting them from hard use. Like bed sheets, table linens could be marked with the initials of their owners. They could also be embroidered or edged with knotted fringe, the embellishment a further sign of gentility.<sup>120</sup>

Fabrics covered furniture besides tables, too. Upholstered chairs marked a certain status for their owners, as well as adding comfort to the home. Upholstery was either leather, which was sturdy, or cloth, which was less durable but offered more choice of color and pattern.

Thomas Bennet had both, his inventory listing “Leather Bottomed Chairs” and a pair of “framed

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<sup>118</sup> Krill, *Decorative Arts*, 258.

<sup>119</sup> Inventory of John Roberts taken 12 May 1720. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “York County Probate Inventories,” Colonial Williamsburg Digital Libraries, <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=Probates\PB00373.xml>

<sup>120</sup> Ulrich, *Age of Homespun*, 302, 278–279.

Stools covered with red Shaloon,” a shiny silk fabric.<sup>121</sup> To protect their fragile upholstery, chairs and sofas could be covered with a slipcover made from a less expensive fabric.

Alternately, the slipcovers, made from a fashionable imported fabric, could conceal a less expensive or plain upholstery.<sup>122</sup> Slipcovers might also be used to update the look of furniture to fit current fashions without the expense of reupholstering the entire piece. In some cases, the slipcovers could be changed seasonally, keeping the most up-to-date fashionable furnishings out of the homes of less wealthy families even as the cost of textiles and upholstery fell within their reach.

Trained workmen usually did the tough work of upholstering in a specialized upholstery shop. On a smaller scale, however, upholstery fabrics could be embroidered by women. Seat covers or cushions—and sometimes whole armchairs—displayed these ornate textile coverings. The fabric covering carried initial value on its own, and the embroidery added value as evidence of women’s leisure work. A popular stitch for upholstery was the Irish stitch, made up of zigzagging lines in an array of colors. Since Irish stitches covered the entire expanse of the fabric, they made a sturdy choice for use on hardwearing upholstery. The colorful zigzags of Irish stitches also appeared on table covers, pocket books and book covers.<sup>123</sup> Irish stitches formed the borders of a number of samplers made by southern girls, especially from those Virginia, but it was rarely used on samplers in the North.<sup>124</sup> Perhaps one Virginia teacher familiar with Irish stitch influenced a group of stitchers, or perhaps the stitch was known by a

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<sup>121</sup> Inventory of Thomas Bennet taken 22 November 1750. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “York County Probate Inventories,” <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=Probates\PB00507.xml>

<sup>122</sup> Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 125.

<sup>123</sup> Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 265–267.

<sup>124</sup> Allen, *Maryland Sampling*, 86.

clutch of girls or their mothers and then copied by other women in their social circles. Irish stitch may not necessarily have been less popular in the North for use on seat covers and other projects, but it could have been less commonly used on samplers because different aesthetics applied to northern and southern samplers.

Samplers, rich with symbolism and tradition, display a significant vein of creativity, individuality, and character. Since the motifs and designs of samplers will be addressed in greater detail in the next chapter, only the briefest attention will be paid to samplers here, focusing on the wider significance of samplers from the South compared with northern samplers. One model of southern girlhood embroidery distinguished northern samplers, which can frequently be categorized by stylistic influences or linked to a specific teacher, from the diversity of southern embroideries, which are more difficult to attribute to a particular teacher or school. Southern samplers defy easy categorization because southern girls from positions across the economic spectrum had access to needlework skills. Wealthy girls might learn them from private tutors, poorer girls acquiring them as part of their apprenticeships. In the nineteenth century, some schools taught girls needlework, but few lasted long enough to establish a unique, identifiable style. Teachers in the South, perhaps because of the lack of established stylistic structure, did not have the drive to create a style attributable to themselves.<sup>125</sup> Few southern samplers incorporate the name of an embroidery teacher into their designs, though, like northern samplers, they almost universally show the name or initials of the stitcher. But samplers were, of course, both a vehicle to display advanced stitching techniques and the field on which to perfect them.

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<sup>125</sup> Kathleen Staples, "Models for Girlhood Embroidery, North and South," *Sampler and Antique Needlework Quarterly* 12 (2006): 8–9.

Samplers used some of the same stitches needed to create and maintain household textiles, from marking sheets and decorating lavish bed hangings or chair covers to mending, darning, and patching. Besides the numerous textiles in their homes, women had to take care of their clothing. Despite all the demands for modesty and warnings against vanity from writers of conduct literature, these same texts also encouraged women to take meticulous care of their personal appearance by keeping their clothes fashionable and in good repair. Real life, too, encouraged them to be careful in their appearance. Young men noticed their appearance, sometimes with an unnerving keenness. In this, the practicality of sewing interleaved with its social function. Dress became the visible proof of both the necessity of owning clothes and keeping them neat and also the creative, expressive choices of fabric, color, and ornamentation.

Philip Vickers Fithian, an English tutor in Virginia, observed the fashions of several young women who visited Nomini Hall, the Carter plantation where he taught. His observations reflected back on his own fluency in the language of fashion and fabrics. Fithian knew how to distinguish one type of fabric from another and to make value judgments based on their quality. In his journal, he commented on women's appearance, noting that Miss Jenny Washington "has not a handsome Face, but is neat in her Dress, of an agreeable Size, & well proportioned." The neatness of her clothes, which Fithian described as "rich & well-chosen, but not tawdry, nor yet too plain," was one of the ameliorating characteristics that made up for her lack of physical beauty. Despite this, he avoided dancing with her, claiming brusquely "that I never was taught to Dance." Jenny Washington's companion, Priscilla Hale, received Fithian's scrutiny, too. She was "a slim, puny silent Virgin" who spoke so little that Fithian had little to say about her character

or “mental faculties.” He described her dress in detail, however, mentioning her “white Holland Gown, cotton Diaper quilt very fine, a Lawn apron... a small Tuft of Ribbon for a Cap.”<sup>126</sup>

Fithian analyzed Betsy Lee particularly carefully. She was a potential marriage partner for him. A “respectable Member of our Family,” brought her to his attention, “intimating that I may, on seeing Miss Lee, after having known, by report, her faultless character, be so pleased with her person as to try to make her mine, & settle in this Province.” After addressing critical aspects of her character such as her complexion, her “Aspect,” which he found “masculine & dauntless,” and her carriage, which was “neat & graceful,” he closely detailed her dress, from her chintz gown and quilted silk petticoat to the stays she wore. He judged the stays to be “a Nuisance both to us & themselves” in that the men “can have scarce any view at all of the Ladies Snowy Bosoms” and the “hard & unyielding” lower edge of the stays made it uncomfortable for the ladies to walk.<sup>127</sup> Ultimately, Fithian decided against marrying Betsy Lee, though it is unlikely that her stays swayed his decision. Fithian judged women not by a single trait but by the interplay of their attitudes, occupations, postures, and clothing, all aspects of femininity and female behavior that needlework influenced. Fithian’s journal entries show how the element of social acceptance overlapped with the element of practicality.

In the eyes of Fithian and the discerning men in advice books—either as authors or as characters—needlework enhanced femininity because of the combination of the two elements. Permissibility and practicality were intertwined. Needlework gave women a general appearance of pleasing submissiveness, dependency, and leisure. “Many of our female Gentry,” Allestree noted derisively, “look upon it as a degrading, a kind of attainder of their blood, to do any thing

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<sup>126</sup> Hunter Dickinson Farish, ed., *Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773–1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated, 1943), 163–164.

<sup>127</sup> Farish, *Fithian*, 171–172.

but please their senses.” Wealthy women view physical labor as degrading. In the South, the connection with slavery cemented this disparagement of labor. But, according to Allestree, it seemed as though mental exertions fell into the same category. “Labor is lookt on as utterly incompatible with Greatness,” Allestree complained, “and consideration is lookt on as a labor of the mind; and there are some Ladies who seem to reckon it as their Prerogative, to be exemted from both.” Allestree wanted to “awaken some Ladies from their stupid Dreams, convince them that they were sent into the World for nobler purposes, then only to make a little Glittering in it.”<sup>128</sup> Needlework, an occupation connected with practical household applications, rescued women from the curse of abject leisure that was no more than “a little Glittering.”

The use of needlework for charitable causes bolstered its shield of social acceptability. These charities exploded in the middle of the nineteenth century, making the industry of charitable sewing a more complex issue than can be fully addressed here. Suffice it to say that the motivation of sewing—charity as opposed to vanity—made a great difference in how women’s work was perceived, and the charitable work of some women reflected well on the practice of needlework as a whole, even if not everyone sewed for pious reasons. Jonas Hanway, in *Advice from Farmer Trueman, to his daughter Mary*, described a model of a charitable woman, one Mrs. Ann Saracen. “She puts children to school,” he extolled, “and employs them in needle-work, partly by making up old linen, which she begs of her rich acquaintance: This she again devotes to the use of the indigent, by assisting them with child-bed-linen; which is returned clean to her after it hath been used, and the same serves for the birth of many children.”<sup>129</sup> Mrs. Saracen used her knowledge of needlework to teach poor children a viable skill and to help

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<sup>128</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 166, 313–316.

<sup>129</sup> Hanway, *Farmer Trueman*, 122.



indigent women prepare for childbirth, though it seemed that the poor women were left to manage their own laundry. Allestree, too, hoped for charitable impulses expressed through the needle. He recalled a time “when women of the Highest rank converted their Ornaments and costly Deckings into cloathings for the poor, and thought no retinue so desireable, so honorable as a train of Alms-folks.”<sup>130</sup> These admirable women used their skills with the needle to transform their objectionable dress into useful, necessary clothes for the poor. It was a high conception, one that combined many expectations for feminine behavior.

Through needlework, women demonstrated their ability to heed these social expectations, including submissiveness and being calm and sedentary. They also proved their potential value in creating and maintaining the textile goods that filled a genteel home. Skill with a needle would prove necessary for anyone hoping to display textiles in a way that affirmed status and affluence. For elite women managing a household, needlework skills gave them the reference needed to make sure work was done efficiently and properly. Thus freighted with symbolic and practical meanings, needlework was an almost unimpeachable activity. Under its protective canopy, however, women used their knowledge of needlework in creative ways. Their individuality showed through this one avenue, free from the rules that hindered their other activities. That needlework subscribed so neatly to social expectations for femininity made it the perfect loophole for creativity.

The overt influence of wealth, status, and education in skilled needlework might have made it a sterile task, just another mechanical assertion of status. Instead, it could be a sparkling creative endeavor. Some writers noticed this tendency and, unsure of what to make of it,

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<sup>130</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 114.

subjected it to ridicule.<sup>131</sup> Burton, for example, wrote “that Embroidery serves likewise to exercise the imagination, and correct the taste. It is connected with drawing and design; therefore, those who would excel in it, must not be ignorant of the principles of the fine arts,” which was, he added slyly, “no small effort of female Genius.”<sup>132</sup> The mocking tone and repeated assertions that only its connections to other worthwhile objectives—taste, design, the fine arts—gave it value disguised an element of truth. Needlework allowed women to express themselves creatively on a platform all their own, while still being seen as feminine and virtuous.<sup>133</sup> Their choices were not unlimited, and their expression not unbounded, but the level of control that women had over their embroidered works might exceed that which they held over other aspects of their lives. Choosing and working specific motifs, even if they were familiar flowers, gave women authorship and agency over one small, stitched patch. Women had few outlets for creativity that were not restricted from the full measure of their imagination by question of virtue. Needlework, because it upheld their virtue, was the best vessel of their expression.

Expression could take the form of color, material, technique, or, most importantly, design. A woman’s femininity could be measured by her choice of subject as well as by the skill with which the piece was completed. Choosing the right subject and creating a beautiful embroidery were considered to be among a woman’s natural abilities, yet they simultaneously spoke to her high level of accomplishment as an undeniably artificial talent.<sup>134</sup> Because

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<sup>131</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 153–154.

<sup>132</sup> John Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*. Third Edition (New York: Hugh Gaine, 1794), 65.

<sup>133</sup> The range of expression in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not as full as it became in the twentieth, when the women’s rights movement allowed female textile artists to approach a great catalog of controversial topics. Less freedom of expression, however, should not be read as a total lack of expression.

<sup>134</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 11–12.

embroidery was seen as innately feminine, despite its requirements of education and wealth, the creative decisions of embroiderers have often been overlooked and the art form designated as craft. Another reason for this is that many embroiderers followed patterns rather than extemporizing their designs. The use of patterns, however, did not disallow creativity in embroidery. Both in the manipulation of standard motifs and in the choice of which patterns to use, women adapted the limited range of acceptable embroidery designs to suit themselves. When choosing a pattern, women did not necessarily search for a cutting-edge trend. The steady march of floral motifs, religious figures, and pastoral scenes through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century needlework indicated that women valued traditional designs over faddish new patterns. Most importantly, the use of patterns did not preclude creativity. For instance, some pattern books offered “ciphers,” little designs that combined letters of the alphabet with each other to form meanings, though the meanings were individually designated and could change depending on the context of their use.<sup>135</sup> Depending on the story she wanted to tell, a woman could employ the same elements over and again in different ways. Context gave repetitive elements their unique meaning. The next chapter will investigate one example of such creativity, a sampler stitched in 1812 that used the familiar format for a girlhood sampler to share the recent and tragic news of the 1811 Richmond Theatre fire. In the sampler, as in other works, established boundaries of craft, including the boundaries set by tradition and technical ability, stretched to accommodate the particular needs of each woman and her story.

The anodyne designs of tradition were part of what maintained the intrinsic femininity of embroidery—the association with flowers, religious impulses, and nature. Floral patterns

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<sup>135</sup> Susan M. Stabile, *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 225.

demonstrated women's love of and connection with nature. Around 1780, the popular embroidered picture of a woman in a garden expressed these tendencies more explicitly.<sup>136</sup> Such scenes simultaneously created and reinforced the natural image of women. In embroidered pastoral scenes, the female figures, usually milkmaids and shepherdesses, downplayed rigorously achieved femininity as natural, easy, and artless. This version of femininity also appealed to men. It fit in with the expectations for women to be submissive, compliant, and obedient, fulfilling their right place in the world's hierarchy.<sup>137</sup> Pastoral embroidery designs bolstered the idea of femininity as a natural and unaffected state, an easy mantle for women to wear.

Though it advanced a picturesque ideal, pastoral embroidery ignored the difficulties of women's lives. It presented a harmonious and perfectly ordered world in place of the chaos of reality.<sup>138</sup> The act of embroidering a scene that replaces reality with purity could be especially appealing in the South, where slavery sustained the farming economy. Pastoral embroideries overlooked slavery's ugliness and the conflicts that roiled around it. Southern women might have used these scenes to comment on slavery without voicing brash opinions. Being gentle of opinion and moderate in tone had long been a highly regarded feminine trait. Allestree noted that not only does a modest woman "refine the Language, but she tunes it, too, modulates the tone and accent, admits no unhandsom earnestness, or loudness of Discourse... restrains all excessive talkativeness, a fault incident to none but the bold... Indeed there is scarce any thing looks more indecent, then to see a young Maid too forward and confident in her talk."<sup>139</sup> To avoid being criticized as too forward, women may have used needlework rather than argument. Pastoral

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<sup>136</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 123.

<sup>137</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 117.

<sup>138</sup> Ulrich, *Homespun*, 144–145.

<sup>139</sup> Allestree, *Ladies Calling*, 61, 214.

embroidery spoke volumes. It suggested harmony and ease where reality showed violence and inequality.<sup>140</sup> Choosing themes that represented rural bliss, women covertly criticized the turmoil of their world.

The act of embroidery shielded women from censure, allowing them to create art without challenging the masculine hierarchy. The connotations of femininity and submissiveness that are embedded in, though not intrinsic to, the act of needlework reinforced women's subordinate position and men's dominant position.<sup>141</sup> But embroidery was neither a purely submissive art nor one devoid of creativity. When women picked up their needle, they picked up a tool that painted, created, modeled, altered, decorated, danced, and flew. Rather than being a mere stereotype of femininity, embroidery was a vital art form that allowed expression and individuality. Frequently learned from mothers, grandmothers, or female teachers, needlework skills also connected girls with a legacy of female learning. Viewing embroidery as nothing more than an accomplishment of an educated woman reduces the agency of women who, in a society that demanded obedience and submission, used what outlets they could to express themselves.

Creative expression through embroidery was not the province of women in the South. Northern women took advantage of the same shields of permissibility and practicality. Elite women in the North and the South both stitched the same types of projects, often for the same reasons. This is because needlework by southern women is not wholly different from needlework done by northern women. The distinctions between them, like the presence of Irish stitch on more southern samplers than northern ones or the use of crewel wool for more northern bed hangings than southern ones, run more along the lines of variations, not complete deviations. This does not mean, however, that southern women's needlework may be blithely grouped with

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<sup>140</sup> Ulrich, *Homespun*, 152.

<sup>141</sup> Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 4, 6.

needlework from the North. There is one critical difference: while needlework is an important source for learning about women's lives in both the North and the South, the scarcity of documents in the South make southern needlework a critical piece of evidence, sometimes the only piece of evidence, in discovering women's stories. The next chapter looks closely at one such example, the Richmond Theatre Fire Sampler, and considers how a piece of needlework displays the tensions between tradition and change and finds the balance between restriction and expression, revealing the story of the anonymous woman who created it.

### Chapter Three: The Richmond Theatre Fire Sampler, An Example

Sally Clark finished her embroidery sampler on 30 July 1812. Despite working her last stitches in the heat of a Washington D.C. summer, the design she stitched recalled to mind the terrible, cold night the previous winter when the Richmond Theatre had burned to the ground. The fire killed seventy-two people. Many of the victims came from wealthy families who presided over Richmond's social scene. Adding to the city's sense of loss, George W. Smith, the governor of Virginia, also died in the fire. He had run back into the burning building to rescue his baby.<sup>142</sup> "Shrieks, groans, and human agony in every shape," an eyewitness lamented, "this is the heart-rending scene that we are called upon to describe. We sink under the effort.—Reader! excuse our feelings, for they are the feelings of a whole city."<sup>143</sup> Indeed, the whole city of Richmond grieved.

As news of the disaster spread, the nation joined the citizens of Richmond in mourning their loss. Newspapers in Washington D.C., Boston, and New York picked up the story, printing letters written by eyewitnesses. The people of Richmond, acknowledging their central role in commemorating the nationally recognized tragedy, erected Monumental Church on the site of the burned theater. The effort took two years of planning. Inside the imposing brick and sandstone building, plaques and statuary marked the graves of the victims of the fire. In a much smaller and more private memorial, Clark incorporated the story of the famous fire into the sampler she finished in the summer of 1812.

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<sup>142</sup> Thomas R. Joynes, "The Burning of the Richmond Theater, 1811," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 51 (1943): 298.

<sup>143</sup> Anonymous, *Calamity at Richmond: Being a Narrative of the affecting circumstances attending the awful conflagration of the theater in the city of Richmond* (Philadelphia: John F. Watson, 1812), 17.

In her sampler, Clark mixed elements relating the Richmond Theatre fire with motifs common to childhood samplers from the early nineteenth century. The combination of traditional forms and contemporary inspirations in her sampler represents both the expression and the limitation of the creativity allowed to women by needlework.



Figure 1: the Richmond Theatre Fire Sampler  
Valentine Museum 81.1119

Where the previous chapters have dealt with wider issues of the social prescriptions and practical reasons that surrounded the acceptability of needlework as an activity, as well as some of the ways needlework conveyed this creativity, this chapter deals exclusively with a single needlework sampler from the early nineteenth century. The close study of a single object, Clark's sampler, allows for a more meaningful examination of the whims of one woman's creativity and the ways that creativity navigated its restraints. While some of the broader trends are lost in this view, the benefit is a particular understanding of how the social prescriptions and the avenues of creativity discussed in the previous chapters applied to one person and her work. Clark's sampler



opens new inquiries, too, including the overlap between popular literary styles and needlework, the commemorative function of needlework, and the female heritage of needle skills. That the sampler exists at all is reflective of the values placed on needlework skills in her time and place, but that the story told by her sampler breaks from tradition demonstrates the flexibility she had—the creativity loophole—within the structured system.

Sally Clark is an anonymous stitcher. Her work is related to embroidery schools of Washington, D.C. and Richmond embroideries but is not definitely attributable to either.<sup>144</sup> The similarities to these schools make it likely that Clark had assistance from a teacher or another experienced embroiderer in designing the sampler. Since her sampler is dated seven months after the fire, it took Clark less than that amount of time to design and complete the sampler. Clark's sampler is complex enough that she would have had to concentrate on finishing it within that time, another indication that she had guidance during the process. Other samplers may have taken shorter or longer, depending on their design and the dedication of the stitcher.

The Theatre Fire sampler is stitched on cream-colored linen with green, beige, off-white, and brown silk thread, as well as a novelty thread, often imported from China, called crinkled silk. To achieve a variety of textures, Clark used seven different stitches, including cross, satin, feather, stem, herringbone, eyelet, and long stitches.<sup>145</sup> The variety of stitches showed off the breadth of her knowledge. It hinted at an extended period spent learning the stitches and their uses. She worked three full alphabets and a portion of a fourth, each in a different script. Two of the alphabets exclude the letter *j*, typical of “printed alphabet needlework patterns before about

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<sup>144</sup> Kimberly Smith Ivey, *In the Neatest Manner: The Making of the Virginia Sampler Tradition* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1997), 9.

<sup>145</sup> Valentine Richmond History Center. Sally Clark Theatre Fire Sampler Object File, 81.1119.

1785, [in which] the letter *i* is used in place of the letter *j*.<sup>146</sup> As the other two include the *j*, Clark may have used several different patterns for the alphabets. The partial alphabet uses ornate lettering, similar that “often found, with variations, on Scotch samplers.”<sup>147</sup> Long before reaching the letter *z*, however, she ran out of room. For more practice in this ornate hand, she used the same fanciful lettering for the majuscules of her signature—Sally Clark Washington July 30 1812—which, in pre-1785 orthography, gave her name, city, and the date of completion of the sampler. A repetitive vine pattern hems in the vertical sides of the sampler, beige and brown berries bursting off curving leaf-strewn stems. The alphabets, vines, and signature, found in some variation in most childhood samplers, create the backdrop for the unusual elements in Clark’s sampler.

Right above her name in the center of the piece, yet set apart from the alphabets by a row of cross-stitches, Clark wrought a poem of twelve lines that described the events of the tragic night in December 1811 and repeated the anti-theater rhetoric that poured from pulpits and presses after the fire.

One evening in December last  
 The six and twentieth day  
 The People there in joyful haste  
 Did go to see a play.  
 When in the midst of joy and mirth  
 The house it caught on fire.

Hundreds enveloped in flames  
 And many do expire.  
 May Theatres be done away  
 From all this earthly shore  
 The houses put to better use  
 And plays be seen no more.

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<sup>146</sup> Sue Studebaker, *Ohio is My Dwelling Place: Schoolgirl Embroideries, 1800–1850* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>147</sup> Studebaker, *Ohio*, 61.

The poem is copied closely, but not exactly, from a broadside about the fire that circulated as far north as Boston.<sup>148</sup>

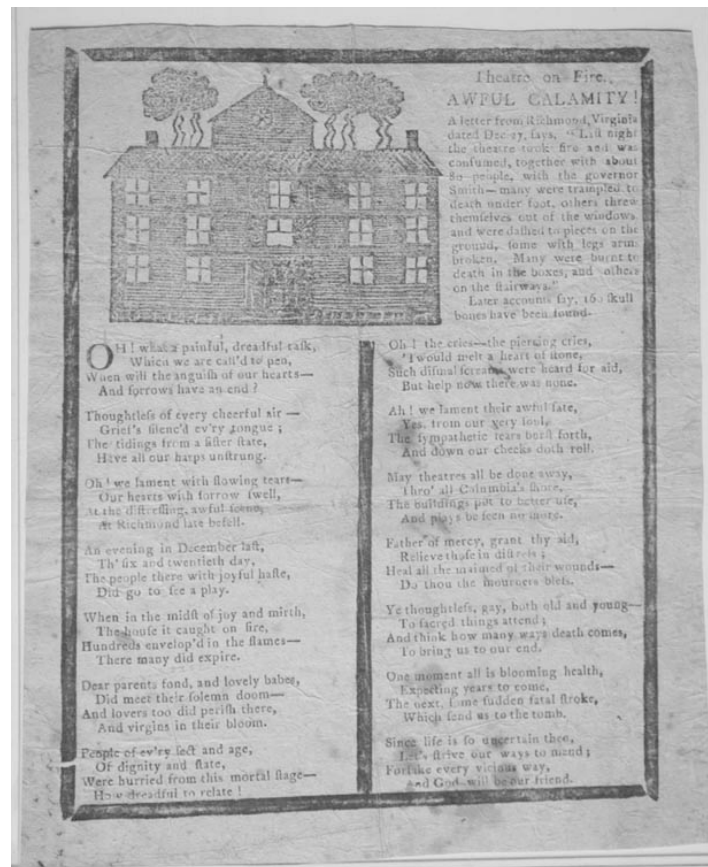


Figure 2: Broadside relating the story of the Richmond Theatre  
Valentine Richmond History Center 50.14

On the broadside, the poem runs fourteen stanzas. Clark chose three of them for her sampler. The first provided the setting, the second the action, and the last the moral. The poem gives meaning to the picture below it.

At the bottom of the sampler, Clark stitched a cluster of buildings. On the far right is the Richmond Theatre, identifiable by the circular window at the center of the uppermost portion of the front elevation of the building. The same broadside that provided the poem also provided the

<sup>148</sup> Valentine Richmond History Center Object File 81.1119.

image of the theater. The line of the roof, the number and placement of the windows and doors, and the decorative brickwork along the vertical edges of the building on the broadside match the copy on the sampler. To corroborate the visual clues, the words “Richmond Theatre” are stitched in small letters in line with the lower-case alphabet in the upper right of the sampler. To the left of the Theatre, just past an oversized urn bearing a flowering plant, is a church. The church, though possibly meant to be a particular church in Richmond, replicates a standard sampler church motif and offers no distinguishing features.<sup>149</sup> On the far left sits a squat Georgian house. The three buildings, interspersed with trees and small shrubs, rest on a solid ground of grass stitched in green crinkled silk.

The artistic composition of the sampler is a common one. The alphabets, set at the top of the sampler and probably worked first, grow increasingly complex as the work progresses downward. The poem follows the alphabets, and below the poem, the picture. The name of the stitcher sits prominently in the center of the work. Lines of cross-stitch or vines separate the collection of distinct motifs, unifying the design by holding the disparate elements apart. The sampler combines design elements from two popular sampler styles. The top portion is similar to English band samplers, which often have alphabets and verses or sayings in rows with flowered vines or geometric figured lines running between them. The picture at the bottom resembles the architectural samplers or building samplers that came into fashion at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>150</sup> Clark’s artistry is competent, but not outstanding. Likewise, the sampler demonstrates good, but not stunning, technical skill. Were it not for the inclusion of the

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<sup>149</sup> There is no possibility of it representing Monumental Church, which was not completed until 1814.

<sup>150</sup> Gloria Seaman Allen, *A Maryland Sampling: Girlhood Embroidery 1738–1860* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2007), 47, 53.

Richmond Theatre motif, the sampler would be an unremarkable example of an early-nineteenth-century childhood sampler.

Instead of an anonymous fate, Clark's childhood sampler is held in the collection of the Valentine Richmond History Center. The reason that it is in Richmond and not Washington, which was presumably as her place of residence, is because of its content. The sampler became historically relevant because of its depiction of the Richmond Theatre fire, not because of its workmanship or the fame of its maker. The identity of Sally Clark is not critically important to deciphering the message of her sampler. In fact, her lack of personal fame even contributes to its meaning in that it illustrates how anti-theater rhetoric had become part of a popular vocabulary.

In addition to demonstrating the spread of anti-theater rhetoric, Clark's sampler is an example of a small-scale, personal commemorative act regarding a national disaster. Using the easily recognizable structural elements of a childhood sampler—alphabets, buildings, aphorisms—Clark shared her memory of the fire and the lessons of its aftermath. Unlike many accounts of the fire, the sampler rejects the macabre sensibility of the emerging Gothic persuasion seeping into literature, news, and art in the early nineteenth century, favoring a more traditional response to tragedy. Her sampler, incorporating current events into a structure bound by tradition, told an innovative story through a fixed medium.

The events of the night the Richmond Theatre burned and the public response to the tragedy, including large-scale commemorative acts, set the background for the choice in design and motifs of the sampler. Comparing the sampler with contemporary news accounts, including the broadside that inspired it, provides insight to popular acceptance and rejection of the Gothic sensibility. A comparison of the designs particular to the Richmond Theatre fire sampler with typical motifs from childhood samplers in Virginia and Maryland will reveal how Clark worked

new information into a proscribed formula. A few pertinent examples from Ohio will offer a wider view of the motifs and designs used in samplers and demonstrate that Clark's sampler fits into a range of needlework that was neither limited to the South nor limited to New England. Her choice of certain motifs reveals her intention to give her sampler a commemorative purpose. Examining the sampler in this manner offers a glimpse into the creative mind of a young girl, revealing the creativity that fell within the parameters of socially acceptable behavior. This sampler, the product of her mind and her hands, demonstrates how current events affected her, how tradition guided her, and how she combined the two influences to commemorate a tragic event.

The play at the Richmond Theater gathered a crowd of more than six hundred people the night after Christmas, 1811. The show, a debut of a recently translated Diderot work, "The Father, or Family Feuds," played to a full house. The audience laughed rowdily as the actors capered across the stage. After intermission, people settled back in their seats for a pantomime, "Raymond and Agness, or the Bleeding Nun." The scene shifted. A stagehand changed the backdrop, raising a chandelier into the rafters above the stage. The chandelier climbed jerkily, and one of its candles flared, catching alight the painted canvas backdrops hanging behind it. The audience, delighted with the pantomime, disregarded the first cry of "fire!" Only when burning shreds of scenery began to fall from the ceiling did panic seize the crowd. A frantic rush to the doors began.<sup>151</sup>

Within ten minutes, the entire building blazed. Patrons "in the expensive box seats were the least likely to escape, while most in the cheaper seats escaped unharmed. The audience members in the pit escaped through the outer door, and those seated in the gallery could reach

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<sup>151</sup> *Calamity at Richmond*, 13-14.

the stairs quickly, but those in the boxes had to cram into narrow hall-like ‘lobbies’ and fight their way toward the staircase to the ground floor.”<sup>152</sup> As the fire grew more intense, fed by fresh air from broken second-story windows, the stairways, crowded with terrified people, caught fire, weakened, and collapsed. Some of those stranded on the second floor leapt from the windows. Others were pushed by the panicked crowds behind them. “People of every description beg[a]n to fall,” an eyewitness wrote, “one upon another, some with their clothes on fire, some half roasted: Oh wretched me! Oh afflicted people!”<sup>153</sup> Bodies, still aflame, were impaled on the points of the iron fence below.

Though leaping from windows injured many and killed several, most of the victims of the fire died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Opaque, poisonous smoke, “saturated with oily vapours,” filled the theater mere minutes after the fire began. “The lights were all extinguished by the black and smothering vapour,” one survivor recalled.<sup>154</sup> Inhaling this cloud of smoke, people fell unconscious to the floor. There the crowds trampled them, crushing them to death. At the end of the night, more than sixty people were dead. Bodies lay mingled in the rubble of the charred, smoking theater. Over the course of the next week, the death toll climbed to seventy-two. The fire affected almost every wealthy society family.<sup>155</sup> Richmond was prostrate with grief. “The people were seen wringing their hands, beating their heads and breasts,” an

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<sup>152</sup> M. Henne, “Miraculously Saved’: Richmond and the 1811 Theatre Fire” (MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 2006), 4.

<sup>153</sup> Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Virginia* (Charleston: Babcock & Co., 1845), 310. This letter was published in the *Richmond Standard* on 27 December 1811.

<sup>154</sup> *Calamity at Richmond*, 22, 20.

<sup>155</sup> Henne, “Miraculously Saved,” 9.

eyewitness wrote, “and those that had secured themselves, seemed to suffer greater torments than those enveloped in the flames.”<sup>156</sup>

On 27 December 1811, the day after the fire, the Common Council of Richmond gathered to respond to the tragedy. They passed an ordinance instituting a ban on theaters. “No person or persons,” it declared, “shall be permitted for and during the term of four months from the passage hereof, to exhibit any public show or spectacle, or open any public dancing assembly within this city.” Violating the ordinance would cost perpetrators a sinister six dollars and sixty-six cents for each hour of their disobedience. The ordinance also asked all citizens to wear mourning crape for one month. One Common Council committee planned for public memorial services; another investigated the possibility of arson.<sup>157</sup>

The arson committee answered to the people who, seeking to lay blame for the disaster on malevolent scheming, raised the question of arson. Finding evidence but no proof of the crime, the committee never formally accused anyone of purposefully setting the fire. Thomas R. Joynes, who survived the fire, wrote to his brother, Levin S. Joynes, about the rumors of arson that surfaced the night of the fire. “It was supposed,” he wrote, “when the fire was first discovered, that the house was intentionally set on fire... But there is now no doubt but that these fears were groundless... It has been, I believe, satisfactorily ascertained, that the fire was accidentally commun[ic]ated by a lamp to the scenery.”<sup>158</sup> By offering new information and being open to interpretation, the rumors of arson sufficed to keep the story circulating through

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<sup>156</sup> Howe, *Historical Collections*, 310.

<sup>157</sup> *Calamity at Richmond*, 30-32.

<sup>158</sup> Joynes, “Burning of the Richmond Theater,” 298-299.



the newspapers for months after the event. Contentions of arson appeared in Richmond newspapers even through the mid-twentieth century.<sup>159</sup>

Whatever started the fire, the construction of the building magnified its effects. “Architects and insurance men say that every theatre is fated to burn down,” the New York Times reported in an 1876 article recalling the 1811 fire. “This sweeping assertion is, in a measure, justifiable as a piece of prophecy by the inflammable nature of stage properties and the general interior fittings of theatrical buildings and the nightly exposure to the peril of ignition from chandeliers on the stage.”<sup>160</sup> Dark hallways, narrow staircases, and limited exits made escape difficult for all and impossible for many. “In the late Richmond Theatre,” Mr. Twaits, one of the managers of the theater reported to an investigating committee in the days following the fire, there was “but one entrance to the boxes and pit, and that so narrow, that two persons could scarcely pass at the same time... It is, therefore, evident, that this ever to be lamented loss... is wholly attributable to the mal-construction of the late Theatre, which certainly offered no means of speedy escape.” Inflammable materials, from carpets and upholstery to the chemical-laden paints decorating the backdrops, filled the theater. “The rapidity of the conflagration,” Mr. Twaits continued, “must have been caused by the unfinished state of the building, there being no plaistered ceiling or wall to prevent the communication of flame.”<sup>161</sup> On 26 December, the flaring candle merely set alight an already dangerous building.

In the days and months following the Richmond Theatre fire, most people, though they knew that the unsafe condition of the theater had cost many lives, did not retaliate against unregulated tinderbox buildings that invited fire. Instead, they turned against plays. Preachers

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<sup>159</sup> “Was the 1811 Theater Fire Set?” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 December, 1948.

<sup>160</sup> “Other Burned Theatres,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1876.

<sup>161</sup> *Calamity at Richmond*, 38.

argued against theater-going, once a favorite pastime of Richmond citizens. They decried acting on the stage, a privilege that until recently had offered high wages and the adoration of an enthusiastic audience. In the early nineteenth century, Richmond offered plenty of spectacles to charm and delight its citizens. Rees Lloyd, an independent minister from Philadelphia, disagreed with all of them. In 1813, he published a sermon focusing on the evils of “stage plays,” but not neglecting the evils of “masquerades, balls, puppet shows, horse races, and gambling.” Lloyd used the Richmond Theatre fire as proof of the hellish danger of the stage. “Will you pay attention to the foolish and lewd speeches of play-actors on the stage,” he charged, “who perhaps, together with you may be consumed in the flames of burning play-houses, and afterwards in eternal flames of hell?”<sup>162</sup> For preachers, it seemed as though the victims of the fire had received their due punishment.

One reason preachers latched onto the argument against the theater so quickly was that theatrical amusements had long drawn the attention of Richmond citizens away from their churches. Plays cost money that could be put to better use. Theaters proffered sinful entertainment that “jeopardized a person’s virtue” and were “accused of wasting the public’s time on frivolity.” Though preachers had long been warning their congregations against the pleasures of the playhouse, it took the fire to change people’s indifference towards the church. Staggered by loss, all of Richmond turned to the churches to remember the dead. In January 1812, attendance at the service for the “official day of humiliation and prayer” exceeded the capacity for St. John’s church.<sup>163</sup> Every church building in the city opened its doors to receive the public. A hymn was written for the occasion:

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<sup>162</sup> Rees Lloyd, *The Richmond Alarm* (Philadelphia: J. Bioren, 1814), title page, 105.

<sup>163</sup> Henne, “Miraculously Saved,” 21–22, 27–28.

Borne down with age, disease, in war,  
Or famine, tho' we fall:  
All conq'ring death, how dreadful are  
Thy visitations all!

Dear victims of its recent rage,  
How wretched was your end,  
Were Jesus not, in Truth's fair page,  
Proclaimed the sufferers friend!<sup>164</sup>

Richmond's attitude towards religion had shifted significantly, and it was not a temporary reaction. Churches remained crowded for months after the disaster. In the decades after the fire, the number of churches in Richmond had quadrupled when the population had only doubled.<sup>165</sup> Congregations that had once shared sanctuary space with each other began to raise money for their own buildings. Inspired by the frenzy of church-building, the people of Richmond clamored for Monumental Church to be constructed on the site of the burned theater.

Building a church as a commemorative site solved several issues facing Richmond. The new church building offered space for growing congregations, and it served as a memorial site for the theater fire.<sup>166</sup> The site already held sacred value, since many of the victims of the fire had been interred on the site. Their bodies, "so far consumed as to fall to ashes," could not be removed to an established cemetery.<sup>167</sup> Monumental Church, raised in 1814, represented years of preparation and dedication to commemorating the fire on a grand scale. The fervor to commemorate the event, however, had begun even before the last cinders cooled. As news of the fire spread along the East Coast, so did the urge to remember it and to cause it to be remembered

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<sup>164</sup> James E. Goode, *Full Account of the Burning of the Richmond Theatre, on the Night of December 26, 1811* (Richmond, VA: J.E. Goode, 1858), 66.

<sup>165</sup> Henne, "Miraculously Saved," 49.

<sup>166</sup> Henne, "Miraculously Saved," 34.

<sup>167</sup> *Calamity at Richmond*, 40.

by others. In the early nineteenth century, women often responded to a death or disaster by creating small memorials and souvenirs of remembrance. Though none of these memorials matched the grandeur of Monumental Church, they performed the same commemorative function.

Mourning, much like needlework, fell under the purview of women. Just as needlework was considered to be innately feminine, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century so was grief. To sustain the tradition of female grief, women taught their daughters the “domestic arts of shellwork, penmanship, souvenir collecting, and mourning. These arts commemorate an artisanal culture in which an artifact bears the mark of its female maker.” Women and girls created and reinforced their own identities through these works at the same time as they preserved the memory of friends and relatives, often female, who had died. Mourning mementos connected the living with their deceased loved ones and stood as “personal memorials that prohibit forgetting... foster[ing] a kind of prospective memory.”<sup>168</sup>

Mourning art was taught and learned within the female community in ways similar to needlework skills. One type of mourning art was hairwork, in which the hair of a deceased woman was woven into a complicated series of knots to form pieces that were treasured and displayed. Hairwork demonstrated the skill of the maker, usually a woman who cherished the memory of the one who had supplied the hair. Commonplace books—scrapbooks filled with poems, mottoes, penmanship exercises, and drawings—are another example of female commemoration. Commonplace books formed significant bonds between generations of women as one book passed from mothers to daughters. Each new generation learned what their mothers and grandmothers had included in their books, altering them by adding their own treasured

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<sup>168</sup> Susan M. Stabile, *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 181, 13, 225.

thoughts. Each generation informed the next of their memories and their process of remembering. This was a frequently backwards-looking, tradition-bound affair. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, women “responded to personal and social change by devoting themselves to the traditions and values of the past.”<sup>169</sup> Women felt deeply their responsibility to remembering the past, so they preserved it in tried and true ways.

Mourning art may have valued tradition over change, but, like needlework, it still embraced rangebound innovation. Clark’s sampler is an example of one of these innovative memorials. As with most mourning art, her sampler has stronger ties to her past than her present. Like a commonplace book, it collects words and images associated with a particular event, capturing its essence through fragments that suggest its entirety. And, as part of the handwork tradition passed along by women, her sampler reflects skills that women in previous generations found necessary. Clark’s sampler showed off her ability to stitch, but the meaning of those stitches leaned to social rather than practical ends.

Samplers made in remembrance of an individual use phrases like “when I am dead and laid in my grave,” “greedy worms my body eat,” or “this mortal frame decay.”<sup>170</sup> A family register sampler frequently served as a memorial for dead relatives. Girls in Virginia in the early nineteenth century found this style especially suitable to their needs, perhaps because of Virginians’ dedication to family, lineage, and heritage. Such samplers were “embroidered memorials” of the marriages, deaths, and births that were important to them and their families.<sup>171</sup> Clark’s sampler, stitched to commemorate an event rather than the death of a person, replaced

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<sup>169</sup> Stabile, *Memory’s Daughters*, 12, 131.

<sup>170</sup> Stabile, *Memory’s Daughters*, 213.

<sup>171</sup> Ivey, *In the Neatest Manner*, 4-5.

the conventional Puritan phrases found on mourning samplers and the genealogies seen on family register samplers with images and a poem particular to the Richmond Theatre fire.

Clark's sampler reflects the anti-theater rhetoric of the sermons and broadsides that appeared all over Richmond and cities along the East Coast after the theater burned. The pulpits and the press denounced theater-going as a sinful indulgence, circulating printed matter to spread their diatribes. At the same time as she drew inspiration and information from these newly available sources, she rejected their Gothic tone, a critical component of their message. Descriptions of death, scenes of horror, and highly emotional reactions, all derived from the Gothic sensibility, filled the discourse after the fire. Newspaper articles and broadsides shared ghoulish details and titillating images of the fire before warning their readers to avoid the theater. Preachers, after describing their horrible deaths in great detail, claimed that the victims of the theater fire had received heavenly retribution. In this way, preachers and newspapers embraced the Gothic sensibility, which seemed to offer the perfect medium to tell the story of the fire.

Events of the night of the fire mirrored themes found in popular Gothic novels: spectacular rescues and harrowing escapes paired with scenes of "vice, violence, danger, death." The very construction of the theater aligned the experience of those trying to escape the burning building with the Gothic, which often features "nightmarish proliferations of walls, gates, gratings, and doors separating the wanderer both from the hidden center and the exit."<sup>172</sup> Accounts of the pitch-black, narrow hallways of the Richmond Theatre might have called to mind similar scenes in novels, such as when two characters in the 1764 Gothic masterpiece *The Castle of Otranto* discover "some stone steps descending into a vault totally dark. 'We must go

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<sup>172</sup> Eugenia DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 16, 21.

down here,’ said Isabella; ‘follow me; dark and dismal as it is.’”<sup>173</sup> With the popularity of the Gothic on the rise at the beginning of the nineteenth century, newspapers and preachers knew that Gothic elements appealed to the public.

Before the introduction of the Gothic element, religion framed accounts of disaster and misfortune. Preachers sought the salvific element in catastrophes, using them to underscore the common failings of humankind and unite their communities. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, accounts of catastrophes and crime shifted away from the religious sphere towards the Gothic. The Gothic turned away from the earlier narrative put forth by the church—that all people were equally sinful and depraved—constructed a narrative in its stead based on the scientific principles of the Enlightenment. Still, people looked for answers for horrific events. But rather than rely on religious explanations that sufficed earlier, people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century turned to the Gothic framework to understand the changing world. By the early nineteenth century, the Gothic sensibility was widespread through print media, and many—though not all—people were adjusting to the world it described. In this world, science obliterated old customs and shifted perceptions about what was acceptable, desirable, and avoidable.<sup>174</sup>

The Enlightenment and a growing interest in science, intellectualism, and “sensibility” attuned people to “a new revulsion from pain.” Pain, fear, and death, which had been accepted as natural human conditions through most of the eighteenth century, became, by the early nineteenth century, frightening states that scientific advancement could eliminate. As they could be avoided, they grew in fascination. Through popular manuscripts like pamphlets, broadsides,

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<sup>173</sup> Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Philadelphia: Henry Carey Baird, 1854), 81.

<sup>174</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3–4.

and novels, readers approached these terrifying, enthralling subjects from a distance.<sup>175</sup> Most of the contemporary publications relating the story of the Richmond Theatre fire show evidence of the Gothic sensibility. For many, the Gothic offered a way to interpret and explain the fire, fictionalizing it in a way that allowed them to react with predictable emotions.

In early accounts of the fire, eyewitnesses dwelled on the grotesque sights and sounds of death they encountered at the scene. For instance, one account described how people who jumped from upper-story windows “broke their necks, or were crushed to death by those who fell on them from the same height” and how the survivors outside could hear “the unavailing and afflicting cries of those suffocating” inside in the smoke and flames.<sup>176</sup> Some writers acknowledged the terrible scenes from that night by avoiding description of them altogether. “I have a tale of horror to tell,” one account began, “horrors that language has not terms to represent.” Speechlessness was a typical Gothic response to horror. It indicated that the observer had a mind so refined and ordered by Enlightenment thinking that it could not process the disorder and devastation it beheld.<sup>177</sup> For many people, the horror of the Richmond Theatre fire overwhelmed their senses. They could not believe the speed and destruction of the ruinous flames or the number of lives lost. The first accounts of the fire, however, began to circulate just a day after the fire, proving that some had managed to put pen to paper despite their disbelief.

While many accounts used Gothic elements to frame the story, they were not universally accepted. Inspired by a broadside featuring the Richmond Theatre engulfed in flames, Clark worked information from the broadside into the fixed yet flexible template of a sampler. The

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<sup>175</sup> Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 63, 66.

<sup>176</sup> *Calamity at Richmond*, 21, 24, 20.

<sup>177</sup> Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 55.



sampler eschewed both Gothic and Puritan influences, commemorating the event without glorifying the macabre or admitting the fragility of life. Clark carefully selected the representations of the theater she wanted for her sampler. The broadside depicted the theater in the act of burning down. Thick lines of menacing black smoke shot from the roof. In contrast, the theater on the sampler looked as it did before the fire. Lush green trees replace the smoke pouring from the roof, making the theater look more like typical buildings on architectural samplers.<sup>178</sup> To further reduce the grotesque, horrific, and sensational influence of the Gothic, Clark avoided any use of the short passage presented on the broadside beside the image of the burning theater, which read:

Last night the theatre took fire and was consumed, together with about 80 people, with the governor Smith—many were trampled to death under foot, others threw themselves out of the windows and were dashed to pieces on the ground, some with legs arms broken. Many were burnt to death in the boxes, and others on the stairways. Later accounts say, 160 skull bones have been found.<sup>179</sup>

This passage adopted several Gothic elements, including the gruesome list of the manner of the victims' deaths and the reference to estimating the number of dead by their "skull bones." Since Gothic crime accounts frequently mentioned using bones and skeletons to reconstruct crime scenes, readers would understand this as a scientific attempt to explain the scope of the tragedy.<sup>180</sup> The sampler did not use any part of this account, pulling its text instead from the long poem on the broadside.

Clark edited the fourteen-stanza poem down to twelve lines, eliminating some of the more explicit, passionate verses while keeping the anti-theater message strong. In her editing, she

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<sup>178</sup> Ivey, *Neatest Manner*, 8.

<sup>179</sup> Valentine Richmond History Center, Theatre Fire Broadside Object File 50.14.

<sup>180</sup> Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 131.

also discarded the overtly religious verses. “Father of mercy, grant thy aid,” one redacted verse read. “Relieve those in distress; Heal all the maimed of their wounds—Do thou the mourners bless.” The poem, like the hymn written to commemorate the fire, tended more towards the traditional, Puritan explanation of tragedy. Grief and sorrow, unavoidable circumstances of life, should be understood as the vengeance of a jealous God. Only repentance could ameliorate them. “Since life is so uncertain thee [sic], Let’s strive our ways to mend;” the poem concluded. “Forsake every vicious way, And God will be our friend.”<sup>181</sup> But rather than offering this religious moral, Clark presented the anti-theater verse as her coup de grace.

Mottoes, proverbs, and aphorisms, often taking the form of poems, were ubiquitous features on samplers. “Remember your creator,” urged an 1804 sampler. “Preserve me, Lord, amidst the crowd,” another says, “From every thought that’s vain and proud, And raise my wandering mind to see, How good it is to trust in thee.” Most verses contained a moral, but not all of them were so overtly religious. They usually stuck to advocating virtue, modesty, and good behavior. “Tho age must shew life’s best pursuits are vain,” one Maryland girl’s sampler said, “And few the pleasures here to be enjoy’d, Yet may this work a pleasing proof remain, Of youth’s gay period usefully employ’d.”<sup>182</sup> This poem promoted religious ideals like hard work and the denial of pleasure without mentioning any religious reward, such as the friendship of God or, as the fire’s commemorative hymn suggests, being able “again to meet the friends we mourn, where bliss eternal flows.”<sup>183</sup> Clark’s poem held a religious message, too, though subtler

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<sup>181</sup> Valentine Richmond History Center Object File 50.14.

<sup>182</sup> Allen, *Maryland Sampling*, 262, 127, 144.

<sup>183</sup> Goode, *Full Account*, 66.

than the adages on many samplers. The anti-theater rhetoric she used as her inspiration often found its greatest crusaders in preachers.

Clark's sampler held fast to tradition in other aspects, too. The alphabets and the vine border on Clark's sampler are clearly motifs plucked from the long tradition of sampler-making. Even the whimsical bird perched atop the church steeple perched on other stitched steeples, too.<sup>184</sup> Finally, the scene at the bottom of the sampler appeared in various forms on other samplers. These scenes and motifs grew in popularity as the purpose of samplers changed from being mere practice for stitching used elsewhere to, in the early eighteenth century, a finished piece worthy of display. At this time, samplers were aesthetically designed with the intention of being framed and prominently displayed in the home. The sampler stood for the acquisition and achievement of fancy needlework skills freighted with social implications of wealth and leisure.<sup>185</sup> The promise of exhibition inspired many girls to include a special theme on their samplers.

One special theme for a sampler intended for display was buildings. Architectural or building samplers commonly included a church or a house. Less frequently, they showcased a specific building, usually one of note in the girl's community. Clark's Richmond Theatre is one example. Other examples surface in Maryland and Ohio. One featured the Medical College of Ohio next to a single rose growing to the height of its second floor windows.<sup>186</sup> In Maryland, a veritable hotbed of architectural samplers, one pictured the Baltimore Hospital, another the Cathedral of Baltimore. Two others depicted St. Patrick's Church, one view without the steeple,

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<sup>184</sup> Stuebaker, *Ohio*, 9.

<sup>185</sup> Ivey, *Neatest Manner*, 19.

<sup>186</sup> Stuebaker, *Ohio*, 25. Oversized flowers were a common way to showcase needle-working talent. The close-up offered a way to demonstrate specialized stitches or particular attention to natural detail. Flowers made to scale with the overall design would have been too small to deliver such detail.

which was added in 1816, and one view with it.<sup>187</sup> All these samplers, and Clark's, too, indicated the name of the buildings they copied.

Samplers also commemorated special events. In 1826, a girl in Wayne County, Ohio, noted that she completed her sampler in the "50th year of the American Independence declared 4th July 1779 [sic]."<sup>188</sup> One charming piece from 1842 worked the phrases "needle first used 1545" and "pin first used 1543" into her otherwise predictable sampler, commemorating early innovations in the art of handwork despite her "probably inaccurate" dates. Another sampler featured a design of steamboats floating along a river, perhaps commemorating their arrival to the town or a trip the girl had taken to see them.<sup>189</sup> Of all the commemorative samplers surveyed for this project, however, Sally Clark's is the only one featuring a building that was the scene of a tragedy or commemorating a nationally recognized disaster.

The theater fire obviously affected Sally Clark deeply. Her sampler offers a glimpse into how she reacted to the disaster. With just seven months between the fire and the completion of her sampler, she probably chose the theme of her work shortly after the theater burned. The news of the fire, fresh in her mind, might have stricken her as being of lasting importance. Working diligently on her sampler through that spring, she created a memorial to the fire as news about it continued to circulate. That she chose to remember the event by stitching the Richmond Theatre before it burned down indicates that she was not lured in by the Gothic attraction to death and devastation that surfaced in many accounts. Instead, she held to traditional sampler motifs, incorporating her commemoration of the theater where it made sense traditionally. She even

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<sup>187</sup> Allen, *Maryland Sampling*, 226-232.

<sup>188</sup> Studebaker, *Ohio*, 227.

<sup>189</sup> Allen, *Maryland Sampling*, 116, 91.

structured her sampler after a seventeenth-century style, proving that her handwork looked farther backward than forward.

Counterpoint to her dedication to tradition, Clark's sampler also demonstrates the creativity exhibited by women and girls through their needlework. Without stretching a single convention of design, Clark conveyed a brand new story through her sampler. Despite its novel theme, Clark would have lost none of the prestige associated with fancy needlework in displaying this sampler—with its luxurious materials and seven different types of stitches—rather than one with only traditional motifs or a more common aphorism. The piece also contained implied social meanings of wealth, leisure, and education. Influenced by a long tradition of female handwork, mourning and commemorative practices, and shared memories, Clark's Richmond Theatre fire sampler melds old influences with new, using a tradition-bound framework to commemorate a recent event. Her work reveals how she used tradition to shape the memories she constructed, preserving them for the next generations.

## Conclusion

Sally Clark's creative work would not have been possible without the established permissibility of needlework built by its social acceptability and its practicality. Stitching her new story, Clark still fit the mold of obedience, passivity, and subordination promoted by advice manuals popular in the eighteenth century. She would have, through her devotion to needlework, avoided pursuits like reading novels, visiting, or excessively physical activities like horseback riding that could lead her to dangerous, unattractive ends. The sedentary, calm motions of needlework affected her physical posture, making it pleasing to both men and women. Her needlework, a sampler, also reflected on the usefulness of the skill. The sampler originated as a teaching tool for girls practicing the stitches they would need to maintain their family's clothing and household textiles, which were themselves laden with meaning. By the time Clark produced her work, the sampler had changed purposes. Although samplers were intended for display more than practice, their old connotations of use and practicality still clung to them.

Practicality and permissibility intertwined, surrounding needlework with an air of acceptability that granted women a range of creative expression denied them through many other outlets. Elite southern women used this to their advantage, just as elite northern women did, creating original, individual creative pieces. These pieces reveal simple facts, like their preferences in color or pattern, and infinitely more complicated ideas, like their interpretations of current events or their relationships with the world. In the South, where documentary evidence is slim, close examination of women's needlework offers a critical resource for understanding these ideas and revealing the creative imaginations and expressions of early American southern women. In the case of Sally Clark, her needlework sampler reveals that the story of the

Richmond Theatre fire resonated with her and how she translated the published material on the fire, with their gruesome descriptions derived from the Gothic sensibility, into a safer interpretation more suitable for feminine needlework. Beyond her personal views, her sampler provides a female reaction to the story of the fire. Men were the primary reporters of the event and, compared with women, their reactions are well documented. Clark's sampler gives evidence of women's views on topics where textual evidence is less available.

Needlework affords this perspective because, coming from a tradition of practical use and feminine acceptability, it allowed a greater leeway for creativity than other activities allowed to women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This creativity, shown in the use of color and choice of pattern, makes needlework an expression of personal attitudes and beliefs rather than a rote and meaningless decorative exercise. Because of this creativity loophole, needlework can flesh out fragmentary evidence or serve in place of absent sources when studying women in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South.

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## Vita

Alyce Graham was born in Wheaton, Illinois on 25 April 1982 and is a citizen of the United States. She received a B.A. in English Literature from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2004. Before beginning the M.A. in History at Virginia Commonwealth University, she worked for two years for the Costume Design Center of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Alyce has had papers accepted at conferences of the Costume Society of America and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts. She was the 2010 recipient of the James Tice Moore Graduate Essay Award. Alyce is continuing her studies in the Ph.D. Program in American Civilization at the University of Delaware.